

CHAPTER 11

The Struggle for Hue—Stalemate in the Old City

A Faltering Campaign—Going into the Walled City—The Fight for the Tower—Continuing the Advance

A Faltering Campaign

While the Marines cleared the new city, the South Vietnamese offensive in the Citadel had faltered. In the first days of the campaign, the 1st Battalion, 3d ARVN Regiment had cleaned out much of the northwest corner of the old city while the 1st ARVN Airborne Task Force, just south of the 1st Battalion, attacked from the Tay Loc airfield towards the western wall. To the east, the 4th Battalion, 2d ARVN Regiment advanced south from the *Mang Ca* compound toward the former imperial palace grounds, enclosed within its own walls and moats.* The battalion made excellent progress until enemy resistance stiffened about half-way toward the objective. By 4 February, the 1st ARVN Division reported that it had killed nearly 700 NVA troops in the Citadel.¹

At this point, General Truong, the 1st ARVN Division commander, decided to make some readjustment in his lines. On the 5th, he moved the airborne task force's three battalions into the northeast sector, relieving the 4th Battalion, 2d ARVN. Assuming responsibility for the airfield, the 4th battalion, on the following day, pushed forward all the way to the southwest wall. At the same time, the 1st Battalion, 3d ARVN Regiment recaptured the An Hoa gate in the northwestern corner of the Citadel. South of the Citadel, just north of the Perfume River, the remaining three battalions of the 3d ARVN Regiment, futilely butted against the southeastern wall of the old city in an effort to roll up the enemy defenses from that direction.²

On the night of 6–7 February, the NVA counterattacked. Using grappling hooks, fresh North Vietnamese troops scaled the southwestern wall and forced the 2d Battalion, 4th ARVN to fall back with heavy losses to the Tay Loc airfield. That afternoon, the cloud

cover lifted enough for South Vietnamese Air Force fixed-wing aircraft to drop 25 500-pound bombs on the now NVA-occupied southwest wall of the Citadel.³

With the NVA pouring reinforcements into the old city, General Truong once more redeployed his own forces. He ordered the three battalions of the 3d ARVN Regiment south of the Citadel to give up the apparent hopeless effort to force the southeastern walls and move into the city. On the afternoon of the 7th, the 3d ARVN Regimental headquarters and the three battalions embarked on South Vietnamese motorized junks which landed the troops at a wharf north of Hue. The 3d ARVN units then entered the Citadel through the northern gate and took up new positions at the 1st Division *Mang Ca* compound. By that evening, General Truong had inside the Citadel four airborne battalions, the Black Panther Company, two armored cavalry squadrons, the 3d ARVN Regiment with all four battalions, the 4th Battalion from the 2d ARVN Regiment, and a company from the 1st ARVN Regiment.⁴

Despite the ARVN troop buildup in the old city, General Truong's forces made almost no further headway against the enemy. For the next few days, the ARVN ran up against dug-in NVA who refused to be budged. The North Vietnamese still controlled about 60 percent of the Citadel. Infiltrating well-fed and well-equipped replacements each night into the old city, the North Vietnamese continued to hold their own against the ARVN.⁵

To the west, the U.S. Army's 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) was having about as little luck as the ARVN forces in the Citadel against the North Vietnamese. Major General John J. Tolson, the division commander, recalled, "I was to seal off the city from the west and north with my right flank on the Perfume River." Tolson observed, however, that the weather and low-ceiling of 150–200 feet combined with the enemy antiaircraft weapons "made it impractical and illogical to contemplate an air assault by any unit of the Division, in the close proximity of Hue."⁶

As the vanguard of Colonel Hubert S. Campbell's 3d Brigade, the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry started out on foot the early morning of 3 February in a cold driz-

* Col Arthur J. Poillon, the operations officer of Task Force X-Ray, recalled that the term Citadel caused some initial confusion as it was "sometimes used to identify the old walled city and sometimes to identify the palace grounds." Col A. J. Poillon, Comments on draft ms, 30Oct69, Donnelly and Shore, "Ho Chi Minh's Gamble" (Vietnam Comment Files). In the present text, Citadel is used to refer to the entire old walled city.

zle from its landing zone, some 10 miles northwest of Hue. With the mission "to move towards Hue, make contact with the enemy, fix his location, and destroy him," the battalion advanced southeastward along a route paralleling Route 1. About 1000, the American troops saw a North Vietnamese battalion setting up defenses in Que Chu, about 500 meters to their front. A tree-lined and thickly vegetated hamlet in a model Revolutionary Development village called La Chu by the South Vietnamese and the La Chu Woods by the Communists, Que Chu extended 200 meters north and south and was about 75 meters wide. Armed with machine guns, AK-47s, and recoilless rifles, and supported by mortars, the North Vietnamese occupied positions originally prepared by ARVN troops. Under cover of rocket fire from especially equipped helicopter gunships of the division's Aerial Rocket Artillery (ARA) Squadron, the American infantry attacked. Finally after several hours, the 2d Battalion cracked the enemy defenses and established a night perimeter in northern Que Chu.⁷

After a relatively uneventful night disturbed by an occasional enemy mortar round, the 1st Cavalry unit faced a fire storm early the following morning. Under cover of darkness the enemy had moved up reinforcements in regimental strength and, after a heavy mortar barrage at daybreak, launched a counterattack. Surrounded and outnumbered, but supported by artillery and the ARA helicopters, the 2d Battalion repulsed several of the enemy efforts. Forced into a shrinking perimeter, the 2d Battalion had sustained casualties of 11 dead and 51 wounded in the two days fighting for Que Chu. The battalion had accounted for eight known enemy dead and captured one prisoner. In assessing the situation that night, General Cushman's III MAF headquarters informed MACV, "it is believed that the 2/12 Cav is blocking a possible exfiltration route for the [NVA] forces involved in the battle of Hue City."⁸

At this time, Lieutenant Colonel Richard S. Sweet, the commanding officer of the 2d Battalion, more concerned about the enemy overrunning his positions rather than blocking any exfiltration route from Hue, held a hasty conference with his staff and company commanders. Although the 3d Brigade headquarters and Lieutenant Colonel James B. Vaught's 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry had arrived in the landing zone to the north, the 2d Battalion could not expect any reinforcements until the next day. Sweet and his officers decided upon a night march to elude the enemy and set up their defenses in a more favorable terrain. Believing the

North Vietnamese would expect a breakout toward the north, Sweet decided to move to the high ground, 4,000 meters to the southwest, overlooking a secondary road and the Song Sao, one of the tributaries of the Perfume River. Under the cover of darkness, the battalion slipped out of Que Chu at 2200 unnoticed by the North Vietnamese. Slogging its way through the wet paddylands, the battalion arrived at the hill mass, Nha Nhan, by 0700 the next morning. Dominating the approaches to Hue six kilometers to the east, the exhausted men of the 2d Battalion established their new perimeter. As one of the troopers later related: "We had gotten less than six hours sleep in the past 48 hours. We didn't have any water and the river water was too muddy to drink."⁹

While the 2d Battalion remained on Nha Nhan, the 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry advanced into the Que Chu sector on the afternoon of the 5th. Patrolling the area west of the hamlet, Lieutenant Colonel Vaught's men encountered only token resistance. In the meantime, Lieutenant Colonel Sweet's 2d Battalion believed it stopped all enemy daylight movement "by calling down artillery on the plains before them." Major General Tolson even gave thought to move the 2d Battalion back to Camp Evans. Tolson later stated: "At this point, . . . I was faced with a couple of situations that strained my resources. . . . when Hue was occupied, my main land supply line was out." Concerned about protecting Camp Evans and his helicopters and supporting his 1st Brigade at Quang Tri City, Tolson believed it "obvious at the time I was told to attack towards Hue that I already had at least three missions that I felt had to be carried out."¹⁰

For the time being, General Tolson dismissed any idea about bringing the 2d Battalion out of the fight for Hue. On 7 February, just northwest of Que Chu, Lieutenant Colonel Vaught's 5th Battalion, 7th Cavalry encountered a strong NVA force that had reoccupied Que Chu. Unable to push the NVA out, Vaught called in ARA helicopters and artillery. The next morning, the Army troopers renewed the attack, but were forced back in the face of NVA automatic weapons fire, RPGs, and mortars. In frustration, the American battalion dug in for the night.¹¹

At this point, the 3d Brigade commander ordered Sweet's 2d Battalion to deploy off its hill and come in behind the enemy, squeezing the NVA between the two American units. On the morning of 9 February, the 2d Battalion troops departed their positions only to bump into a North Vietnamese battalion in the hamlet of Bon Tri, about 3,000 meters south of Que Chu.

Like Vaught's unit, Sweet's battalion had little success against the strong enemy defenses.¹²

For the next few days, the 1st Cavalry units west of Hue, like the ARVN in the Citadel, faced stalemate. They were able to hold their own, but did not have the wherewithal to push the NVA out.* During this period, the North Vietnamese command maintained its "own support area outside the western wall [of the Citadel] . . . capitalizing on the failure of friendly forces to isolate the Hue battlefield." As Peter Braestrup, the *Washington Post* correspondent, later wrote, "sealing off an eight-mile perimeter [west of Hue] would have demanded far more troops . . . than were available."¹³

With the clearing of southern Hue by the 1st Marines, General Cushman prepared to bring more forces into the fight for the entire city. After the arrival of General Abrams and the formal establishment of the MACV Forward headquarters at Phu Bai on 12 February, Cushman met with the Army general the following day. They both agreed that the "successful conclusion to Operation Hue City was the number one priority in ICTZ." The III MAF commander relayed this concern to General Tolson, who still wanted to return the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry to Camp Evans. Cushman admonished the 1st Cavalry commander to give up any notion of withdrawing the 2d Battalion from the fight. The Marine general stated that the battle was about to reach a climax and ordered Tolson to keep his forces in position to prevent the enemy from escaping to the southwest.¹⁴

In the interim, General Westmoreland and the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff had sent reinforcements to I Corps. The 1st Battalion, 327th Airborne Regiment from the 101st Airborne Division had arrived at Phu Bai and came under the operational control of Marine Task Force X-Ray. Another battalion from the division was on its way by sea. The South Vietnamese flew the first elements of the Vietnamese Marine Task Force A to Phu Bai from Saigon to relieve the battered Airborne Task Force in the Citadel. At Phu Bai, on 9 February, Brigadier General Foster C. LaHue, the Task Force X-Ray commander, had ordered his 1st Battalion, 5th Marines to prepare to move into Hue.¹⁵

Going Into the Walled City

At 0700, 10 February, Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines departed the battalion's Phu Loc operating area south of Phu Bai for the latter base. Reaching Phu Bai about 1100, the company came under the direct operational control of the 5th Marines regimental headquarters. Colonel Robert D. Bohn, the 5th Marines commander, ordered the company into Hue city to reinforce the 1st Marines. Approaching the An Cuu Bridge that afternoon in a "Rough Rider" convoy, the Marine infantrymen dismounted from their trucks, crossed the broken span, and entered southern Hue on foot. At the same time, the 1st Battalion's Company B arrived at Phu Bai as did the lead elements of the Army's 1st of the 327th Airborne. The Army battalion made ready to relieve the remaining companies of the Marine battalion in the Phu Loc sector. The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, in turn, was about to expand the Marine Operation Hue City into the old Citadel to reinforce the ARVN.¹⁶

Simultaneously, the Marine command attempted to improve the coordination for artillery, naval gunfire, and other supporting arms for the Citadel fighting. Earlier on 8 February, the 1st Field Artillery Group (FAG) at Phu Bai, the artillery command for Task Force X-Ray, deployed four 155mm howitzers of Battery "W", 1st Battalion, 11th Marines to firing positions at Gia Le, about 3,000 meters west of Phu Bai, to improve supporting fires for the forces in Hue. Two days later, the 1st FAG sent two 4.2-inch mortars from the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines to the stadium in southeast Hue to provide CS (teargas) and heavy mortar support for the forces in the Citadel. About the same time, a 105mm howitzer battery from the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines entered the city across the newly established pontoon bridge over the Phu Cam Canal. From its positions in southern Hue, the battery was in position to support the Marines to the north and to the west.¹⁷

On 10 February, the 1st FAG commander, Lieutenant Colonel John F. Barr ordered two officers on his staff to the Citadel area as forward observers. One of the officers, First Lieutenant Alexander W. Wells, Jr., the S-2 [intelligence officer] on the FAG staff, remembered that he received word that morning that the "colonel" wanted to talk to him. Barr informed Wells that he had volunteered the young lieutenant "*for a 24-hour mopping-up mission* [emphasis in the original]" to General Truong in the Citadel to coordinate supporting fires. Wells, whose tour in Vietnam was about over,

*As U.S. Army historian George L. MacGarrigle observed, "the enemy probably was content to contain him [the Army forces west of Hue], rather than risk a major fight should the weather clear, giving the 1st Cavalry an opportunity to 'pile-on.'" George L. MacGarrigle, *Historian*, CMH, Comments on draft, dtd 5Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

indicated he would rather stay where he was, but Lieutenant Colonel Barr gave him little choice.¹⁸

Shortly after 1630 on the 10th, Wells and his radio operator flew by helicopter to the Tay Loc airfield in the Citadel where the Marine lieutenant was to provide support to the 2d Battalion, 4th ARVN and the Black Panther Company, which had just retaken the field. As the aircraft approached Tay Loc, the enemy took it under sniper fire. The two Marines leaped out of the hovering craft and ran into a Quonset hut, near the airfield tower, and “full of Australians [advisors to the Vietnamese units there] playing cards and drinking scotch.” At that point, Wells recalled he was told that General Truong wanted to see him at the *Mang Ca* division headquarters compound, about a mile to the east.¹⁹

Upon Wells reaching the division headquarters, General Truong briefed him upon his new assignment as a forward observer with the “supporting remnants of an ARVN Airborne battalion pinned down in a forward area.” Wells remembered that he “was shocked to learn that the [1st Battalion,] 5th Marines had not arrived yet and that he and his radioman would be the only Americans in actual combat with the ARVN.” The Vietnamese general pointed out to Wells, on a large wall map, the location of his designated outpost, surrounded by enemy troops. Truong explained the Vietnamese unit required “his ‘big guns’ immediately to break the siege.” According to Wells, “Truong emphasized . . . that the Emperor’s Palace of Perfect Peace and the Royal City itself were in a strict no-fire zone, but H&I [harassing and interdiction] fires could be designated on the outer wall surrounding the Palace grounds.”²⁰

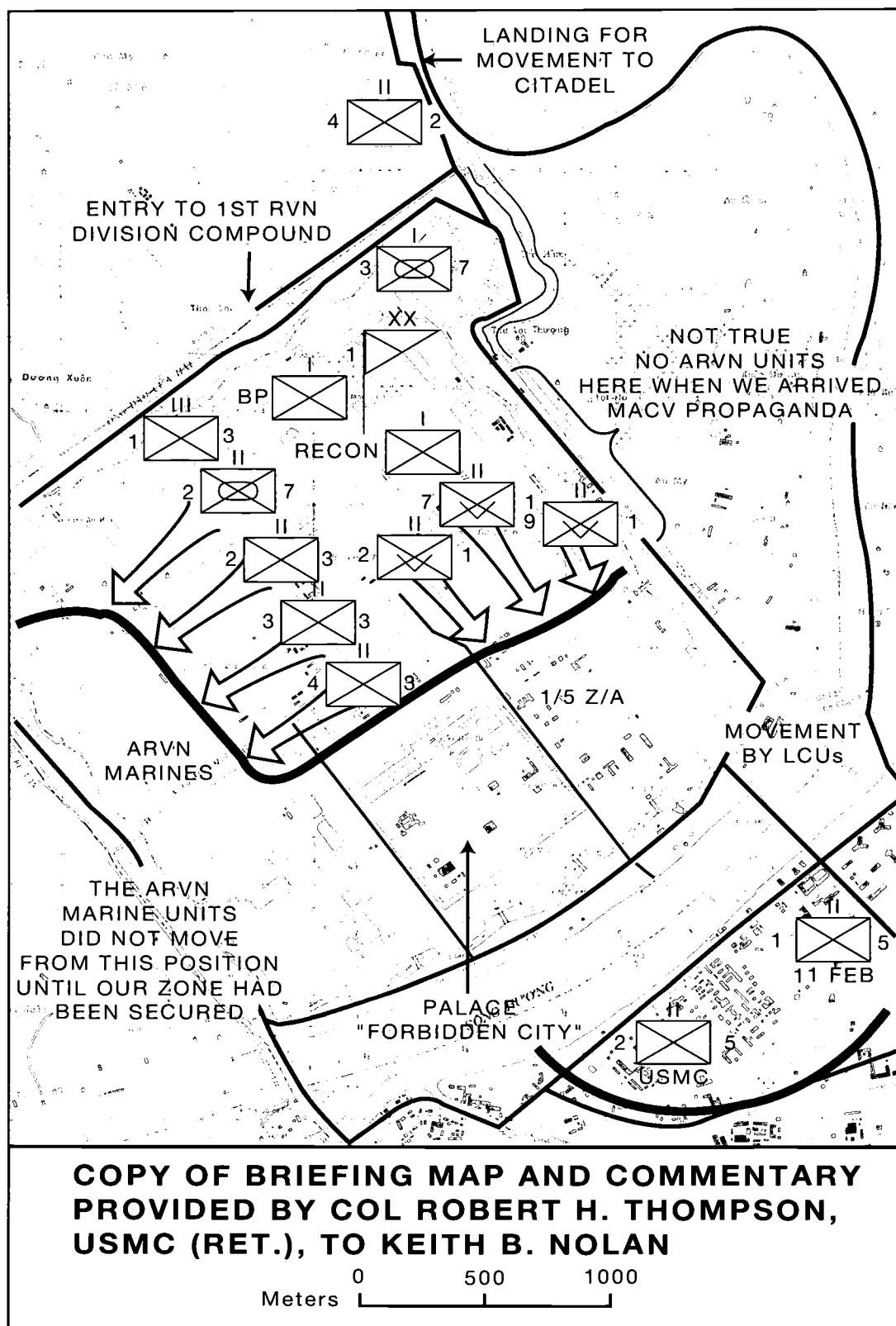
After the briefing, two ARVN soldiers, whom Wells remembered as rangers, escorted the Marine lieutenant and his radioman through the dark streets and alleyways to the ruins of a Buddhist pagoda, about 500 meters west of the Dong Ba tower. Wells recalled it took him about three hours to negotiate the half-mile distance from the *Mang Ca* compound to the pagoda. Inside and around the courtyard of the temple only a short distance from the Imperial Palace were about 100 Vietnamese troops. According to Wells, they were surrounded by North Vietnamese forces. Given his ominous circumstances, Lieutenant Wells nicknamed his refuge the “Alamo.” For the next two weeks, Wells called in Marine supporting artillery and naval gunfire from ships off the coast, adjusting his target selection by reference to his map and to sound.²¹

In the meantime, General Truong revised his plans for the battle of the Citadel. With the arrival of the South Vietnamese Marine Task Force A at Phu Bai, he proposed to have them replace the battered Vietnamese airborne battalions in the eastern sector. The airborne units would then return to Phu Bai and be flown back to Saigon. Through the chain of command, he asked for Task Force X-Ray to provide him with a U.S. Marine battalion. The U.S. Marine battalion would then relieve the Vietnamese Marines and attack to the south. After the arrival of the American Marines, the Vietnamese Marines would push to the west and then turn south, advancing along the western wall. In the meantime, the four 3d ARVN Regiment battalions would continue to clear the northwest sector. Eventually the allied forces would surround and isolate the NVA forces, holed up in the former imperial palace

Vietnamese Marines deploy after U.S. Marine helicopters, in the background, have brought them into a landing zone near Hue. While not depicted in this photo, on 11 February, Marine helicopters had brought one company and the Task Force Headquarters directly into the Citadel.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A422067





grounds, which separated the Vietnamese and American Marine sectors.²²

As was often the case, events overtook the plans. Although the Vietnamese Marine Task Force A and its 1st Battalion arrived at Phu Bai from Saigon on 9 February and came under the operational control of the 1st ARVN Division, the Vietnamese Marines remained at Phu Bai. In a meeting with the Vietnamese Marine commander, Major Hoang Thong, at Task Force X-Ray headquarters, Brigadier General LaHue suggested that Thong deploy immediately to the Citadel. Major Thong, however, declined until the rest of his command joined him. The Vietnamese commander explained that he "was acting under written instructions promulgated by the Vietnamese Joint General Staff which prohibited piecemeal [commitment] . . . of his force."²³*

The support elements of the Vietnamese Marine Task Force reached Phu Bai on the night of 10 February from Saigon and Major Thong began his preparations to move the 1st Battalion into the Citadel. On the morning of 11 February, U.S. helicopters started the helilift of the Vietnamese Task Force headquarters and 1st Battalion into the Citadel. Low ceiling and drizzle forced a halt in the air movement of the Vietnamese Marines with only the task force headquarters and one company of the 1st Battalion in the old city. General LaHue proposed to Major Thong that he order the remainder of the battalion be trucked to southern Hue and then board LCM (landing craft mechanized) for the trip downriver to a landing site north of the Citadel. The Marines would then move on foot into the city. Again Major Thong refused "as he did not feel that either route was sufficiently secured." It would be two days before additional units of the Vietnamese Marine task force joined the one company in the Citadel.²⁴

In the meantime, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines began to go into the old city. Shortly after 1045 on 11 February, Marine CH-46 "Sea Knight" helicopters lifted three platoons of Company B from the Phu Bai airfield to the *Mang Ca* compound in the Citadel. Enemy gunfire wounded the pilot of the helicopter carrying the 3d Platoon, forcing him to abort the mission and return to Phu Bai with the troops still on board. Later

that day, Company A with five tanks attached from the 1st Tank Battalion embarked in a Navy LCU at the ramp in southern Hue. After their relatively uneventful cross-river passage, the Marine company and tanks joined the two platoons of Company B at the 1st ARVN Division headquarters.²⁵

On 11 February as well, Major Robert H. Thompson, the commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, and his command group accompanied his remaining companies from the Phu Loc sector to Phu Bai. Only 10 days before, Colonel Bohn, the regimental commander, had chosen Thompson, who had served with him before as a battalion operations officer, to take over the battalion after the wounding of its previous commanding officer. Before assuming command of the battalion, Thompson, a lieutenant colonel selectee, had been the III MAF Embarkation officer.** The NVA had prepared a rather undignified assumption of command ceremony for the new battalion commander. Thompson recalled:

The moment I stepped off the helicopter [at Phu Loc] we received mortar incoming. My first 15 minutes with 1/5 was spent at the bottom of a muddy fighting hole with my baggage and several Marines piled on top of me.²⁶

When Major Thompson arrived at Phu Bai, he reported to General LaHue. The Task Force X-Ray commander told him that the 1st Marines had largely cleared southern Hue, "but that the 1st ARVN Division was having a very difficult time in the Citadel." General LaHue stated that Major Thompson's battalion would be given a zone of action in the Citadel to assist the ARVN in cleaning out the remaining NVA forces from the city. LaHue expressed some concern about Thompson's rank or rather lack of it. According to the battalion commander, LaHue feared that "since I was only a major, I might be dominated or overly influenced by General Truong." General LaHue even suggested "making me a brevet colonel." Major Thompson replied that he did not believe that unusual action would be necessary, since he did not usually wear rank insignia in combat. The battalion commander had the impression that "no one seemed to know

*Colonel Talman C. Budd II, who as a major served as an advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Task Force at Hue, commented that Major Thong was correct in that Vietnamese Armed Forces "policy precluded the piecemeal commitment of an operational unit so waiting until the other battalion (the 5th) arrived was appropriate." Col Talman C. Budd II, Comments on draft, dtd 30Mar95 (Vietnam Comment File).

**Colonel Rex C. Dillow, who served as the III MAF G-4 or logistic officer, recalled that Major Thompson had headed the III MAF embarkation transportation section and had the responsibility for shipping of resupply to Marine units. According to Dillow, Thompson had always wanted an infantry assignment, but still had done an "outstanding job" for him. Dillow stated that he, therefore, "offered no objection when Colonel Bohn wanted him for the 5th Marines." Col Rex C. Dillow, Comments on draft, dtd 10Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A194565

A Marine M48 tank in support of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines enters the Citadel. On the front turret is an ironic commentary on the war and the anti-war movement reading, "The Original Flower Children."

what the actual situation was in the Citadel. I can remember General LaHue commenting that it shouldn't take more than a few days to clean up the Citadel affair."²⁷

After concluding his conversation with General LaHue, Major Thompson and his command group, together with the 3d Platoon of Company B, departed Phu Bai by "Rough Rider" convoy to Hue. Like the other 5th Marines battalions, the 1st Battalion came under the operational control of the 1st Marines. Upon his arrival at the 1st Marines command post in the former MACV compound in the new city, the battalion commander immediately discussed the situation with Colonel Stanley S. Hughes, the 1st Marines commander. According to Thompson, Hughes ordered him to "move up the Perfume River in LCUs, land and enter the Citadel from the north." He then was "to seek out General Truong and advise him of my intentions." Thompson recalled that he was to launch a three-company attack southward "within a zone of action that extended from the inner palace wall on the west to the Citadel Wall on the east."²⁸

Major Thompson and his advance group spent the night of 11–12 February in some damaged Hue University buildings. Just before he retired for the night, the battalion commander remembered that "an Army major appeared before me in full battle dress, including a .45-caliber pistol." The man identified himself as Father Aloysius S. McGonigal, a Catholic chaplain assigned to the MACV advisory group. He understood that "my chaplain had not accompanied us and asked that he be allowed to accompany us to the Citadel." According to Thompson, he gladly accepted the offer.²⁹

The following afternoon Companies C and D from Phu Bai joined Thompson and his small advance party at the LCU ramp in the new city. He transferred Company D to the operational control of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines. Thompson then completed his preparations for the crossing of the river to the Citadel side. After some delays because of enemy mortar and sniper fire on river traffic, Major Thompson's headquarters group, the Company B 3d Platoon, and Company C embarked on board a Navy LCU for the river passage. Although encountering an occasional RPG round or enemy sniper fire from both banks of the Perfume

River while on board the Navy craft, the Marines landed at the ferry landing north of the city without incident. As the troops were about to start their march to the Citadel, Major Thompson later related that “villagers warned me that the NVA had set up an ambush along the route I had chosen.” The Vietnamese civilians guided the Marines along another road. Upon entering the northern gate into the Citadel, the battalion was met by Captain Fernandez Jennings, Jr., the Company B commanding officer, who had arrived the previous day, and some ARVN officers. After some misunderstanding, the battalion commander convinced the South Vietnamese to permit the Marine battalion to come into the 1st Division compound.³⁰

After his arrival at the *Mang Ca* compound, Major Thompson met with General Truong and the staff of the 1st ARVN Division. According to Major Thompson, General Truong “was very eager to accommodate our plan of attack or anything we wanted to do, for that matter.” The staff briefed Thompson on the situation, advising him that “an ARVN Airborne battalion was holding a position in the vicinity of where we wanted to launch our attack from and that they would hold that position until we passed through that morning.”* Thompson then prepared his plan. He remembered several years later that he proposed “to move from our assembly area [in the division compound] at first light the next morning in a column of companies to make contact with the Airborne battalion which was to serve as our line of departure [LOD].” The battalion would then advance “with two companies abreast” and one company in reserve.

Again the actual situation differed from what was supposed to be. Apparently when the one Vietnamese Marine company came into the Citadel the previous day, the Vietnamese airborne units departed for Phu Bai and Saigon. Unaware of the interruption in the airlift of the Vietnamese Marines, Major Thompson radioed Colonel Hughes late on the night of 12 February that he had no information on the whereabouts of

the two Vietnamese Marine battalions but, “unless directed otherwise, intend to commence attack at 13 [February] 0800 . . .” Thompson also did not know that the Vietnamese airborne had departed the Citadel.

The Fight for the Tower

As planned, on the morning of 13 February, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines moved out of the *Mang Ca* compound with two companies abreast—Company A on the left and Company C on the right. Company B would remain in reserve. From the outset, the Marines encountered “enemy elements of squad and platoon [size] in well prepared positions and bunkers dug in built up areas and along the Citadel walls.” In Major Thompson’s words, “[within] fifteen minutes . . ., all Hell broke loose. There was no Airborne unit in the area and Company A was up to their armpits in NVA.” Under fire from automatic weapons, fragmentation grenades, B-40 rockets, mortars, and AK-47s, Company A, within minutes, sustained 35 casualties. Among the wounded was Captain John J. Bowe, Jr., the company commander.³¹

At that point, Major Thompson ordered his reserve, Captain Jennings’ Company B, to relieve Company A. First Lieutenant Scott A. Nelson’s Company C resumed the attack with Company B on its left flank. With two tanks in the lead, Company C advanced about 300 meters before heavy enemy fire from an archway tower along the Citadel’s eastern wall leading to the Dong Ba Bridge, once more stopped the Marines. The NVA had dug in at the base of the wall there and “tunneled back underneath this structure.” While protected by the thick masonry from allied supporting fires, the enemy could use the archway to bring further reinforcements into the Citadel. With the Marine battalion about 75 meters short of its original proposed line of departure, Colonel Hughes radioed Major Thompson to hold his positions, “reorganize and prepare plans for continuing attack indicating type fire support deemed necessary and desirable.”³²

Unable to budge the enemy with his present resources, Major Thompson replied that he required the entire arsenal of allied power to support his attack the next morning. Thompson wanted “to walk the artillery in front” of his advancing troops and close air support missions to soften the enemy defenses. He also asked that his Company D, still in the southern city, be returned to his operational control in the Citadel.³³

On the morning of the 14th, the battalion resumed the attack. Offshore, Navy cruisers and destroyers

*In a copy of a map that Colonel Thompson received in his briefing and which he in turn provided Keith Nolan, three ARVN airborne battalions are shown attacking south in the eastern sector of the Citadel. The four battalions of the 3d ARVN Regiment supported by an armored cavalry company are attacking towards the western wall. Another armored cavalry company, the division headquarters, the Black Panther Company, and the division reconnaissance company are in the *Mang Ca* Compound. The 2d Battalion, 4th ARVN Regiment is outside the Citadel protecting the northern approaches. Map attached to Col Robert H. Thompson ltr to Keith W. Nolan, dtd 16Sep80 (Nolan Papers, MCHC).

opened up with their 5-inch and 8-inch guns. Marine 8-inch and 155mm howitzers from firing positions at Phu Bai and Gia Le added to the bombardment. For the first time in several days, the cloud cover lifted for a brief period and Marine F-4B Phantoms and F-8 Crusader jets flew support missions. First Lieutenant Andrew C. Delaurier, a Crusader pilot from VMF-235, observed that as his two-plane flight arrived over Hue City there was "extremely heavy air activity everywhere." They had to make two runs to acquire the target, the Dong Ba tower. Once they had it, his wingman "proceeded with one run with zunis and snakes and I followed up with the napalm."* Although enemy antiaircraft fire hit Delaurier's aircraft causing him to leak fuel, he made his way safely back to Da Nang.³⁴

Despite the heavy bombardment, the tower still stood. As Major Thompson later explained, the naval guns "were accurate, but of little value because their flat trajectory either hit the outside of the Citadel wall or passed over the wall and any targets that we might have had inside the wall." Thompson also praised the accuracy of the Marine artillery, but with the battalion on the "gun target line** . . . it [was] virtually impossible for us to lean into our fires." In other words, with the Marine artillery firing at extreme range and parallel to the direction of attack, the shell dispersion could cause friendly casualties. According to Thompson, the NVA also moved forward when the Marines fell back to use their supporting arms, "so when the fires were lifted we had to fight to retake more ground."³⁵

The Marine attack soon stalled. On the right, Company C advanced about 100 yards, destroyed an NVA rocket position, and captured an enemy soldier who walked into the company lines. But on the left flank, Company B made no progress against the enemy-occupied tower. After several futile attempts to take the tower, Major Thompson ordered both companies back into night defensive positions.

Earlier that day, Captain Myron "Mike" C. Harrington's Company D had reverted to Thompson's command. Harrington brought two of his three platoons to the LCU ramp in southern Hue for transportation down river to the Citadel. At the ramp, there were two LCUs, but fully loaded with supplies for the



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A373668

In the fighting in the Citadel, a Marine grenadier fires his M79 grenade launcher. Apparently he has modified his jacket to include a belt pouch for grenades. He also has one grenade stuck in his helmet strap.

1st Battalion. Harrington squeezed on board one of the craft with his headquarters group and one infantry squad. Although taking fire from NVA gunners on the Citadel wall, the Navy craft safely made the trip across the river. Harrington and his small force jumped off and waited for the LCUs to make a return trip with the rest of the company.³⁶

At the LCU ramp, the remaining two platoons boarded the Navy craft to join their company commander and his small detachment. Again as the LCUs made their way across the Perfume, NVA gunners took them under fire. On the opposite shore, two Marine 4.2-inch mortars responded with both high explosive and CS shells. A sudden shift of wind brought the gas fumes back on the Navy boats, blinding and choking both the sailors and Marines. The two LCUs returned to the southern ramp. The ship commanders decided against another attempt to cross the river. Fortunately after several hours, a Navy Swift boat arrived with three Vietnamese junks in tow. Armed with a mounted .50-caliber machine gun, the Swift boat commander agreed to take the Marines on board the junks and tow the small convoy to the other

*"Zunis" refer to 5-inch Zuni rockets, an air-to-surface unguided rocket with solid propellant while "Snakes" pertain to 250- and 500-pound bombs configured with a special tail called "snake eyes."

**The gun target line was an imaginary straight line from the guns to the target.

side. After the Swift boat left the junks at a point off shore, the Marines rowed them to the northern landing site where an impatient Captain Harrington was waiting for them.

Arriving in the Citadel while it was still light, about 1800–1900 on the 14th, Harrington and his command joined the remainder of the battalion. That night, Major Thompson briefed Harrington on the situation and told him that it would be Company D's turn to go against the tower the next morning. Harrington returned to his company and prepared them for the coming attack.³⁷

On the 15th, Marine artillery and naval gunfire once more hit the enemy positions. Under the pounding this time, part of the tower gave way. With another break in the cloud cover, two Marine A-4 jets darted in under the gray skies and dropped 250- and 500-pound bombs on the target.* Backed both by tanks and Ontos, the Company D Marines pressed forward with Company C protecting its right flank. The North Vietnamese, nevertheless, defended their positions tenaciously and Major Thompson ordered Company B, which had been in reserve, again into the attack. After six hours of hard fighting, including hand-to-hand combat, Harrington's 1st Platoon established a foothold at the base of the tower. According to one account, Marine Private First Class John E. Holiday made a "one-man charge" against an enemy machine gun bunker on the wall, firing his "machine gun from the hip, 'John Wayne' style." The rest of the company followed him and captured the tower.^{38**}

The capture of the tower came at no small cost. Thompson's battalion lost 6 men killed and sustained more than 50 wounded, while claiming 20 enemy dead. That night, Captain Harrington left one squad in the tower and established his CP in a damaged house below the wall. In a surprise night attack, the NVA retook the tower for a brief period. According to Harrington, the Marine squad fell back without orders and the company commander at the base of the tower suddenly saw North Vietnamese soldiers crawling over the rubble of the tower. Laying down a base of fire from his

defensive positions, Captain Harrington led another squad in a counterattack. The tower finally remained in Marine hands.³⁹

Continuing the Advance

On the morning of the 16th, the battalion continued to push southeast along the Citadel Wall. Major Thompson's Marines immediately made contact, "engaging the enemy at extremely close range." Despite heavy enemy resistance, the 1st Battalion advanced about 150 yards. At that point, Major Thompson called a halt to allow fresh supplies reach the battalion. In the days' fighting, the Marines accounted for another 63 North Vietnamese dead while sustaining casualties of 7 killed and 47 wounded.⁴⁰

For the next few days the 1st Battalion met the same close-quarter resistance from the enemy. In contrast to the enemy in southern Hue, the battalion discovered that the NVA units in the Citadel employed "better city-fighting tactics, improved the already formidable defenses, dug trenches, built roadblocks and conducted counterattacks to regain redoubts which were important to . . . [their] defensive scheme." Major Thompson later observed that the older city consisted of "row after row of single-story, thick-walled masonry houses jammed close together and occasionally separated by alleyways or narrow streets." The Marines encountered "hundreds of naturally camouflaged, mutually supporting, fortified positions." Moreover, according to the battalion commander, "both of our flanks were exposed to enemy." To the east, or left flank, four- or five-story houses stood outside the moat from which the "NVA were able to dominate the top of the Citadel wall with observation and fire." To the west, or right flank, the "imperial palace provided the enemy a haven from which he could deliver small arms, rocket and mortar fire." Eventually Thompson received permission to fire mortars and on a "few occasions to have the ARVN fire artillery for us inside. . . the palace walls." As Major Thompson wrote in 1980, the enemy "had everything going for him."⁴¹

Thompson countered the enemy fixed defenses with heavy artillery, naval gunfire, liberal use of riot control agents, and when the weather permitted, fixed-wing support. Major Thompson observed, however, "there was slow, misty cold rain falling constantly. I don't recall seeing the sun during that period and the cloud cover broke enough to allow close air support on about three brief occasions." The Marine battalion commander depended largely on his unit's own firepower, espe-

*In 1980, Colonel Harrington in his comments to Keith Nolan recalled only one air strike while he was in Hue and that was while he was attached to the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines. Harrington Comments on Nolan ms, dtd 24May83 (Harrington Folder, Nolan Papers). The battalion report, however, mentions that the battalion controlled a flight of A4s against the Citadel wall. 1/5 AAR, Opn Hue City.

**A search of award recommendations failed to locate any prepared for Private First Class Holiday for this action.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190588

During a lull in the fighting in the Citadel, a Marine takes time out to clean his M16 rifle. Marines had discovered through bitter experience that the M16, if not cleaned regularly, was prone to jamming.

cially his mortars and automatic weapons, and the tanks and Ontos that reinforced his battalion. He placed both the tanks and Ontos under the control of the attached tank platoon commander. The infantry provided a screen while the mobile Ontos or tanks furnished direct fire support. In order to enhance observation, the tank or Ontos commander together with the infantry commander would reconnoiter the target area, generally a building blocking the Marine advance. The tank or Ontos commander then returned to his vehicle, prepared to move forward at full speed as the infantry Marines laid down a heavy volume of fire: "Upon reaching a position where fire could be placed on the target, the vehicle commander halted his vehicle and fired two or three rounds into the target then reversing his direction, returned quickly within the friendly front lines."

At first, the M48 tank's 90mm guns were relatively ineffective against the concrete and stone houses; shells occasionally even ricocheted back upon the Marines. The tank crews then began to use concrete-piercing fused shells which "resulted in excellent pen-

etration and walls were breached with two to four rounds." Although casualties among the Ontos and tank crews were high, the tanks themselves withstood with relatively little damage direct hits by the enemy RPG rounds. Major Thompson compared the tankers to the "knights of old sallying forth daily from their castles to do battle with the forces of evil . . ." One Marine rifleman stated: "If it had not been for the tanks, we could not have pushed through that section of the city. They [the NVA] seemed to have bunkers everywhere."⁴²

From its firing positions in southern Hue, the two-tube 4.2-inch mortar detachment from the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines supported the battalion's advance with both high explosive and CS rounds. One of the Marine gunners, Private First Class Edward M. Landry, remembered several years later, "I did my job . . . on the mortar, followed orders, was scared . . . the whole time, and took care of my buddies." Landry recalled, "we had one sergeant in charge . . . and no officer. Which we didn't need anyway as we knew our job." On 18 February, he noted in his diary: "Firing a CS



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371377

In heavy house-to-house fighting in the Citadel, a Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines machine gunner, with his assistant close by, fires his M60 machine gun on its tripod at an enemy position. Both Marines are laden with bandoliers of ammunition for their weapon.

mission across the river again today. The air is full of gas. . . . We are almost used to it unless it is very heavy. We then use our masks." In the Citadel, the 4.2-inch CS shells proved more effective than the E-8 dispensers. The rounds penetrated the tile roofs of the buildings and "concentrated the full power of the round in the building rather than relying on the infiltration of the CS gas from outside." Enemy prisoners testified to the demoralizing effect of the gas on their units, although some NVA officers and senior NCOs carried gas masks with them into battle.⁴³

After heavy fighting on 17 February, Major Thompson called another temporary halt to the advance. NVA mortars sank an LCU attempting to resupply the battalion in the Citadel. Facing shortages in food and ammunition, especially in 106mm rounds for the Ontos and 90mm rounds for the tanks, Thompson rested his exhausted men until the supplies reached his battalion. The attack was at a standstill.⁴⁴

An exhausted Marine crew member lies on top of his Ontos tracked vehicle among its six 106mm recoilless rifles.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190767



CHAPTER 12

The Struggle for Hue— The Taking of the Citadel and Aftermath

*The Struggle in the Western Citadel—An Estimate of the Situation and Mounting the Offensive—
Closing Out Operation Hue City—A Summing Up*

The Struggle in the Western Citadel

While the American Marine battalion fought for the Dong Ba tower and painfully inched its way forward, the Vietnamese Marine task force also entered the battle. After several delays, on 13 February, U.S. Navy landing craft ferried the command group and the remaining companies of the 1st VNMC Battalion and the entire 5th VNMC Battalion from the LCU ramp across the Perfume River to the northern landing site. At his *Mang Ca* headquarters, the 1st ARVN Division commander, General Truong assigned the southwest sector of the Citadel, west of the Imperial Palace, to the Vietnamese Marine Task Force.* According to Truong's concept of operations, the following morning, the task force would pass through friendly forces south of the headquarters and then attack first to the west and then make a left turning movement with the 1st Battalion on the eastern flank and the 5th Battalion on the western.¹

As planned, at 0900 on the 14th, the Vietnamese Marines left their line of departure, but both battalions immediately ran into strong enemy forces. From 0930–1200, the 5th Battalion engaged in heavy house-to-house fighting until it reached its first objective. In its sector, the 1st Battalion failed in its mission to secure a small school, stubbornly defended by the NVA.²

According to a South Vietnamese reporter who accompanied the 1st Battalion's 4th Company, a Vietnamese Marine platoon leader, Third Lieutenant Nhut, led his men supported by a tank into a pagoda from which to launch the assault on the school. After a sup-

porting air strike on the enemy positions, Lieutenant Nhut suddenly dashed forward toward an abandoned house, halfway between the school and the pagoda. Enemy automatic fire cut the lieutenant down. The company commander shouted over the radio: "I never told anyone to charge ahead yet. I told everyone to wait . . ." He then reported to the battalion commander "the loss of a 'big child'" [referring to a "comrade in arms"]. During a lull in the fighting, a small group of Marines recovered Nhut's body and equipment. On the helmet was the inscription "Live beside you, darling, die beside buddies." The reporter later learned that this was the slogan of the 4th Company. During the 14th, the 1st Battalion took casualties of 9 dead and 24 wounded. Repulsing early morning probes on its positions on the 15th, the 1st Battalion counterattacked and finally captured the schoolhouse that afternoon. In two days of heavy fighting, the two Marine battalions had advanced less than 400 meters.³

To the north of the Vietnamese Marines, the 3d ARVN Infantry Regiment in the northwest sector of the Citadel also met with setbacks. On 14 February, the enemy forces broke out of their salient west of the Tay Loc airfield and cut off the 1st Battalion of the 3d Regiment in the western corner of the Citadel. It took two days for the ARVN to break the encirclement.⁴

By this time, the enemy also had its problems. On the night of 16 February, the ARVN troops at the "Alamo" with Lieutenant Wells, monitoring enemy radio frequencies, intercepted a transmission ordering "an attack of battalion-size reinforcements into the Citadel through the 'west gate' and over the moat bridge." Wells immediately called upon the Marine 155mm howitzers at Gia Le and all available Navy gunships on station to "'fire for effect' at the on-call targets around the gate and bridge." According to the Marine lieutenant, the howitzers "and a 5-inch mount from one of the destroyers responded simultaneously within three minutes and continued firing for approximately 10 minutes." Lieutenant Wells remembered that after approximately 100 rounds, "there was

*For purposes of control, Truong had divided the Citadel into six zones or areas of operations: Zone A was the *Mang Ca* compound; Zone B was the area immediately south of the headquarters and under friendly control; Zone C was in the northwest sector and given to the 3d ARVN Regiment; Zone D was the sector of the U.S. 1st Battalion, 5th Marines; Zone E was the Imperial Palace and grounds still occupied by enemy forces; and the Vietnamese Marine sector was to be Zone F. Pham Van Son, *Tet Offensive*, pp. 257–58.

screaming on the radio." The enemy had received a direct hit on the moat bridge, killing a high-ranking (possibly a general) North Vietnamese officer and blowing several enemy troops into the water.^{5*}

About midnight, the ARVN intercepted another enemy message from the commander of enemy forces inside Hue to his immediate superior. The NVA commander in Hue announced that his predecessor had been killed, that he had assumed command, and that "many other men had either been killed or wounded." He recommended that his troops be permitted to withdraw from the city. The senior officer denied the request and "ordered the new cmdr [commander] to remain in position and fight."^{6**}

An Estimate of the Situation and Mounting the Offensive

At the same time, the U.S. command feared a buildup of NVA forces in the Hue sector. Earlier on the 16th, General Abrams, the MACV (Forward) commander, had talked to Major General Tolson, of the 1st Cavalry Division, and then flew over the Army division's objective area west of the city. According to his observations and information, the NVA had at least three battalions still in the city: "They are resupplied nightly from a base camp 18 kilometers west of the city, generally through the west gate. They have plenty of 60mm mortar and B-40 rocket ammo." Moreover, allied intelligence now identified a new enemy battalion west of the city and a new regimental head-

quarters two kilometers north of the city with at least one battalion. Abrams radioed General Cushman to expect "a renewed attack in the Hue area at any time" and that "we must seek every means to reinforce the 3d Bde [Brigade] of the 1st Air Cav [Air Cavalry] Div to bring additional forces to bear north and west of Hue." According to the MACV (Forward) commander, "we should make every effort to move against the enemy, now, straining our logistic base to the maximum to include air supply if required."⁷

Later on the same afternoon at Phu Bai, General Abrams hosted a meeting with Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky and Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, the I Corps Commander. Lieutenant General Cushman, the III MAF commander, and Brigadier General LaHue, the Task Force X-Ray commander, also attended the conference. The MACV Forward staff and General LaHue briefed the Vietnamese dignitaries on the Hue situation. According to Abrams, Vice President Ky stated that his intelligence sources concurred with the American assessment of an enemy buildup west of the city. Ky voiced the opinion that the North Vietnamese were willing to sacrifice "thousands of men to win a slight political gain." The South Vietnamese Vice President declared that the U.S. forces should not allow the enemy use of pagodas, churches, and other religious symbolic buildings to deter their advance and that he would "accept responsibility" for any destruction.⁸

The following day, General Westmoreland, the MACV commander, met with both Generals Abrams and Cushman. Westmoreland concurred with their belief that the enemy was about to launch a major operation with Hue as its target. He also accepted the judgment of both of his field commanders in I Corps upon the need for further reinforcements. The American commanders decided to place under Task Force X-Ray the 1st Brigade of the 101st Airborne Division with two battalions. They also agreed to reinforce the 3d Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division with two more battalions. According to the allied plans, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines would continue mopping up in the modern city and expand operations to the east and south of Hue. The 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne would block avenues of retreat to the south and southwest, while the 3d Brigade, 1st Air Cavalry Division pressed the NVA from the northwest.⁹

In the Citadel, itself, General Truong, the ARVN 1st Division commander, prepared for the final thrust against the entrenched and determined enemy forces. He assigned the Vietnamese Marine Task Force, now

*Wells was convinced that the 155mm howitzers hit the bridge since the enemy message about the attack "came just after I heard arty rounds coming in." Wells, "Excerpts from Combat Report."

**According to a recent Vietnamese history, the Communist Central Party Military Affairs Committee issued instructions that the Citadel must be held until 18 February. On the 20th, the local *Tri Thien Region Party Committee* suggested to the Central Party committee that it permit the withdrawal from Hue. The Central Party then instructed the Communist military region headquarters to: "Strive to hold, you will be supplied, including by air." The Vietnamese account then goes on to state "From the night of the 20th through the 23d of February IL-14 aircraft of our Air Force flew parachute resupply to our forces in Hue. Although the effectiveness was low, the resupply by our air force stimulated the fighting morale of our troops and people on the battlefield." *Tuan Khu No. 4 [Military Region 4], Lich Su Khang Chien Chong My Cuu Nuoc (1954-1975) [History of the War of National Salvation Against America (1954-1975)]* (Peoples Army of Vietnam Publishing House: Hanoi, 1994), pp. 236-38. The authors are indebted to Mr. Robert J. Destatte of the Defense Prisoner of War and Missing Personnel Office, U.S. Department of Defense, for the above translation. The authors know of no source that confirms or mentions the Vietnamese claim of an airlift to the NVA forces in the Citadel.

reinforced by a third battalion from Saigon, to clear the southwestern wall.* With the Vietnamese Marines on the western flank, he placed the 3d ARVN Regiment in the center with orders to attack south towards the Imperial Palace. The Vietnamese general placed his Reconnaissance Company on the right flank of Major Thompson's 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, which renewed its assault in the southeastern sector.¹⁰

From the 18th through the 20th, the American Marine battalion and South Vietnamese units in the Citadel continued to meet dogged resistance from the enemy. If the NVA in the Citadel were now fighting a rear guard action, they contested nearly every piece of ground. Even with mounting casualties, the North Vietnamese continued to throw replacements into the fight and their supply lines remained open. During the early morning hours of 19 February, two enemy battalions attacked the South Vietnamese Marines in the southwestern sector of the Citadel. Although the Marines, supported by artillery, beat back the enemy assault, several high-ranking NVA officers and political leaders used the "diversion" to make good their escape from the city.¹¹

In the southeastern sector, on 19 February, after regrouping, the American Marine battalion resumed the offensive. With Companies B, C, and D in the vanguard, and Company A still in reserve, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines only made nominal advances against its stubborn foe, holed up in the rubble, structures, and walls of the Citadel. Major Thompson, the battalion commander, later remembered that one particular building, "a large, two-storied administrative building (the largest in the Citadel)" was of particular concern to him. From it, the enemy had excellent observation and fields of fire. According to Thompson, he "felt that if we could take this position, the rest would be easy." By the 20th, however, Thompson believed that most of the companies had run out of steam and that some new approach was needed.¹²

* Colonel Talman C. Budd II, then Major Budd and advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Task Force, remarked that Major Thong, the Vietnamese Marine Task Force commander, maintained his command post with his 1st Battalion commander, since they were close friends. According to Budd, he did so because Colonel Yew, "the ceremonial Asst. Commandant, was sent up to Hue to oversee the TF 'A' operations." The Task Force Commander "resented that Col Yew had been sent up to Hue so rather than locating the TF CP [Command Post] in the vicinity of the 1st ARVN Division where Colonel Yew was . . . [he] chose to move his CP forward with his old friend the 1st Battalion commander to keep Colonel Yew out of his hair." Col Talman C. Budd II, Comments on draft, dtd 30Mar95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Budd Comments.



Photo is from the Abel Collection
Walter Cronkite, the CBS Evening News anchorman, is filmed covering Marine operations in Hue. The battle for Hue provided dramatic footage for the TV cameras which Americans at home could view almost the next day.

At Phu Bai and Da Nang, both Generals Abrams and Cushman shared Major Thompson's concern about progress in the Citadel and American casualties. News correspondents with the Marines in the old city filed dispatches and film about the intensity of the fighting in the old city that American audiences viewed and read almost the next day.** One dramatic picture showed a Marine tank with a makeshift litter on its rear, carrying wounded from the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines back to the battalion aid station. Reporter Lee Lescaze wrote an article entitled "Shortage of Men, Air Support Slows Marine Drive in Hue" that, on 19 February 1968, appeared on page 1 of the *Washington Post*. According to Lescaze's account, the battalion had only advanced four blocks and still were two blocks from the southern wall of the Citadel. He quoted Marine company officers asking "when are they going to get help." Lescaze described the lead companies "trying to keep on line as they maneuver through buildings and rubble of Hue." In some instances, corporals were acting

** Two of the news correspondents, Alvin B. Webb, Jr., of the United Press and H. D. S. Greenway of *Time Magazine*, were wounded when they and Charles Mohr of the *New York Times* pulled a wounded Marine to safety in the Citadel. Braestrup, *Big Story*, I, p. 238.

platoon leaders taking the place of wounded or dead company officers. One officer remarked, "We don't have enough men, enough air support, or enough artillery to do this thing quickly . . ."¹³

On 20 February, General Abrams radioed General Cushman that he recognized the efforts of everyone "to reduce the siege of Hue and that the weather has had considerable impact." Abrams, nevertheless, considered "the measures so far taken to be inadequate and not in consonance with the urgency of the problem or the resources you command." The Army general considered it "essential that we bring to bear every available means at our disposal in firepower and support to eliminate the enemy forces in Hue." He directed Cushman to give priority on artillery fires to both the ARVN and Marine units in the city. Abrams declared that General Truong should coordinate "all outside support rendered and we should be responsive to his requests." He told Cushman: "In accomplishing all the above, I direct that the resources owned by the U.S. be unstintingly committed to the support of the Vietnamese forces of all types cutting out all the red tape and administrative procedures that in any way hinder the conduct of the battle." According to Abrams, "this is one battle and anything anyone has that is useful should be committed to its early and final conclusion."¹⁴

At the same time he radioed Cushman, General Abrams also sent a message to General Tolson of the 1st Air Cavalry Division. He told Tolson: "You have a priority task to clear the northwest, west and southern approaches to Hue within the next 48 hours, using all resources at your disposal . . ." Abrams then ordered General Tolson to "make personal contact with BG

Truong . . . , assess the situation within the city . . . and report personally to this headquarters with your proposed plan of action." The MACV (Forward) commander then promised Tolson that he would issue the "necessary orders" to General Cushman "to insure that all available resources are placed at your disposal to accomplish this mission."¹⁵

Despite the note of anxiety in Abrams' messages, the battle for Hue was in its last stages. On 20 February, reenforced by the 2d Battalion, 501st Infantry and the 1st Battalion, 7th Infantry, the 1st Cavalry's 3d Brigade, now four battalions strong, prepared to clear the Que Chu area. With clearing weather and both air and artillery support, the 3d Brigade advanced against stubborn enemy forces, who fell back towards Hue. By the end of 22 February, the Brigade was within 2,500 meters of the city walls. In the two days of the attack, the U.S. troops had killed more than 120 of the enemy. The brigade was about to close the western approaches to Hue, cutting the enemy supply route into the city. On the previous day, U.S. Army Brigadier General Oscar E. Davis, the assistant division commander of the 1st Cavalry, had become the coordinator of supporting arms fire in the Citadel with his headquarters collocated with General Truong at the *Mang Ca* compound.¹⁶

In the Citadel, Major Thompson had decided on another tack to get his battalion moving again. On the afternoon of the 20th, he held a conference with his company commanders. Thompson stated that "to continue the attack as before would be sheer folly" and suggested the possibility of a night attack. According to Thompson, most of the company commanders "were not very enthusiastic . . . they were willing to try, but I could see that their hearts were not in it." He understood their reluctance, "they had endured a great deal during the past two weeks." On the other hand, a few days earlier, he had given his reserve company, Company A, to First Lieutenant Patrick D. Polk. In a brief period, Polk had revived the morale of the company, which had taken horrendous casualties on the first day of action in the Citadel. Thompson believed that "Pat Polk and Company A were ready to go." According to the plan, a platoon from Company A was to seize three key facilities, including the two-story administrative building, flanking the North Vietnamese positions during the night. At first light, the rest of the battalion was to launch the general attack.¹⁷

As planned, the 2d Platoon, Company A, led by Staff Sergeant James Munroe, moved out at 0300 on the 21st from the company perimeter. Divided into three approximately 10-man teams, the Marines cap-

*The 1st Marine Division responded to obvious concern by higher headquarters. Although not disputing the accuracy of Lescaze's article, a division message stated that of the 10 platoons of the battalion in the Citadel, three were commanded by lieutenants, one by a gunnery sergeant, two by staff sergeants, two by sergeants, and two by corporals. In its message, the division observed that weather permitted fixed-wing support only on three days, 14–16 February 1968. Because of the need for accuracy, the division stated it used only 8-inch howitzer and naval gunfire in support of the battalion. It admitted that "1/5 casualties have been high. During past week, priority of personnel replacement has been given to the 5th Marines." 1st MarDiv msg to CGFMFPac, dtd 21Feb68, Encl 14, 1st MarDiv ComdC, Feb68.

**Brigadier General Paul G. Graham, who as a colonel served as the G-3 or operations officer of the 1st Marine Division, believed that this message, "was simply a case of a frustrated Abrams trying to direct one of his subordinate commanders to hurry the Hue campaign which would relieve him of some political stress caused by the Hue attack." BGen Paul G. Graham, Comments on draft, dtd 20Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Graham Comments.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371416

Marines of Company L, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines use walls and the sides of houses to cover their advance on a key North Vietnamese position in bitter street fighting in the Citadel. On 21 February, the company reinforced the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, relieving the 1st Battalion's Company B.

tured all three buildings with only minimum resistance by the enemy. Major Thompson later speculated that the North Vietnamese withdrew from the buildings during the night to sleep elsewhere. In the morning about daybreak, the enemy troops started to move back, providing "a turkey shoot" for the Marines of Company A. According to one of the Marine enlisted men, "Hell, the first thing in the morning we saw six NVA . . . just standing on the wall. We dusted them all off." According to Major Thompson, "this threw the NVA into utter confusion and . . . gave our other companies the spirit they needed to continue the attack with zest." Despite the initial success, the North Vietnamese "defended the ground within the zone of action with tenacity." By the end of the day, the battalion had killed about 16 North Vietnamese, taken 1 prisoner, and captured 5 individual weapons at a cost of 3 dead and 14 wounded Marines. The battalion was still about 100 yards short of the southeastern wall.¹⁸

The end, however, was in sight. On the 21st, Company L, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines had relieved Company B, which received a well-earned rest. The following morning, the 1st Battalion prepared for the final assault on the southern wall. Lieutenant Polk carefully briefed Company A, which this time was to be in the vanguard

of the attack. At 0930, the Marines once more pushed forward. Except for some scattered snipers and an occasional mortar round, the enemy seemingly had melted away. Upon reaching the southeastern wall of the Citadel, Lance Corporal James Avella took out a small American flag from his pack and fastened it to "a sagging telegraph pole." The battalion's after-action report documented this event with the phrase, an "element" of Company A "hoisted our National Ensign."

Upon the securing of the wall, Major Thompson ordered the new company under his command, Company L, to capture the southern gate and the immediate area outside the Citadel leading to the bridge across the river. The company commander, Captain John D. Niotis, made his preparations for the assault. Major Thompson set up his temporary command post in a building about 300 meters from the objective so that he could witness the attack. Thompson recalled it was "a classic combined arms effort that could not have been executed better on a blackboard." The sun was out for the first time in two weeks and Marine fixed-wing aircraft dropped napalm within 800 meters of the advancing troops. A M48 tank provided suppressive fire to the company's rear at enemy positions on the palace wall. At



Top is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801236 and bottom photo is courtesy of Col Talman C. Budd II, USMC (Ret)
Top, on 24 February, South Vietnamese soldiers from the 212th Company, 3d ARVN Regiment raise the South Vietnamese flag over the Citadel. Below, Major William P. Esbelman, the senior advisor to the 4th Vietnamese Marine Battalion, is seen at the CP of the 4th Battalion along the West Wall with Vietnamese Marines.



one time, the tank turned around and trained its 90mm main gun directly at the building occupied by Thompson and his command group. The tank fired but according to the battalion commander "the round hit a stone archway between us and exploded." Again, the tank opened fire, raking the building with its .50-caliber machine gun, but Thompson's operations officer "had the presence of mind to get on the radio and get the tank from firing at us." Major Thompson later related that the tank commander, the tank platoon sergeant, "was very embarrassed about taking his battalion commander under fire." Without any other major incidents but sustaining casualties of 3 dead and 30 wounded during the day, by 1800, the Marine battalion succeeded in attaining all of its objectives. According to the battalion's report, "enemy contact . . . was lighter than any previous offensive day." One Marine observed, "Hey it's Washington's birthday."¹⁹

To the west of the American Marines, however, the North Vietnamese continued to fight for nearly every inch of the old city still in their hands. In the Vietnamese Marine sector on the 22d, the enemy fired 122mm rockets followed by ground attacks on the Marine positions. Although forced back, the North Vietnamese maintained the pressure on the Marine task force. On the 23d, the Vietnamese Marines "were in moderate to heavy contact" throughout the day and "no advances were made . . ." Venting his anger at what he considered the slow progress of the Vietnamese Marines in a message to General Westmoreland, General Abrams threatened to recommend to the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff the dissolution of the Vietnamese Marine Corps. He complained to Westmoreland that the Vietnamese Marines in the last three days "have moved forward less than half a city block," although being the "strongest force in the Citadel either Vietnamese, U.S., or enemy."^{20*}

*Colonel Talman C. Budd II, a former advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Corps, commented that the criticism of the Vietnamese Marines was unjust. He claimed that U.S. commanders were critical without understanding the Vietnamese limitations. He remarked that the Vietnamese Marines were basically light infantry with their battalions numbering about 400 to 600 men and "were standing toe to toe with the same NVA with far less resources than the Marine units had. The VNMC had a battery of 105mm howitzers; no tanks, Ontos, or other supporting arms." According to Budd, "the battle in the western sector of operations was in many respects more difficult and ferocious because the enemy had the unrestrained ability to replenish his forces and supplies with impunity through the west wall." Budd admitted, "the Vietnamese could have been more aggressive under some circumstances but I'm still not sure that Hue City was one of those cases." Budd Comments.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A800450

A Marine sergeant from the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines sits with his weapon on the throne inside the Imperial Palace. The palace was recaptured from the North Vietnamese by South Vietnamese forces, not by the U.S. Marine battalion.

Notwithstanding Abrams' frustrations, both the 3d ARVN and the Vietnamese Marines were about to close out the chapter on the battle for the Citadel. On the 22d, the 3d ARVN Regiment had assisted the Vietnamese Marines in quashing the enemy attack and mounted a counterattack spearheaded by the 1st Division's Black Panther Company. ARVN and American artillery, on the night of the 23d, spoiled another NVA attempt to break through South Vietnamese defenses in the western sector of the Citadel. The 2d Battalion, 3d ARVN then launched its own surprise attack along the southern wall. At 0500 on the 24th, soldiers of the ARVN battalion pulled down the Viet Cong banner and raised the Republic of Vietnam standard in its place on the Citadel flag tower. By 1025 on the 24th, the 3d ARVN Regiment had reached the southern wall and secured it. General Truong then ordered the Black Panther Company and the 2d Battalion, 3d ARVN to assault the Imperial Palace. Meeting little resistance, the ARVN troops, by late afternoon, recaptured the palace with its surrounding grounds and walls by late afternoon. In the meantime, the Vietnamese Marines took the western wall. By nightfall, only the southwest corner of the Citadel remained under enemy control. Under cover of darkness at 0300 on the 25th, the 4th Vietnamese Marine battalion launched a surprise attack and eliminated this last pocket of North Vietnamese organized resistance in the

Citadel. Outside of the eastern walls of the Citadel, a two-battalion ARVN Ranger task force cleared the Gia Hoi sector, a small enclave located between the Citadel and the Perfume River that had been under NVA control since 31 January. Save for mopping-up operations, the fight for the Citadel was over.²¹

For the U.S. 1st Battalion, 5th Marines in the Citadel, except for isolated skirmishes, its last significant action occurred on the 22d with the seizure of the southeast wall and its approaches. Major Thompson had hoped to participate in the taking of the Imperial Palace, but as he later ruefully observed: "For political reasons, I was not allowed to do it. To save face, the Vietnamese were to retake the 'Forbidden City'" Marine tanks, Ontos, and recoilless rifles, however, provided direct support for the assault on the palace. On 26 February, ARVN forces relieved the Marine battalion, which departed the Citadel to join the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines in a two-battalion sweep east and north of the city.²²

Closing Out Operation Hue City

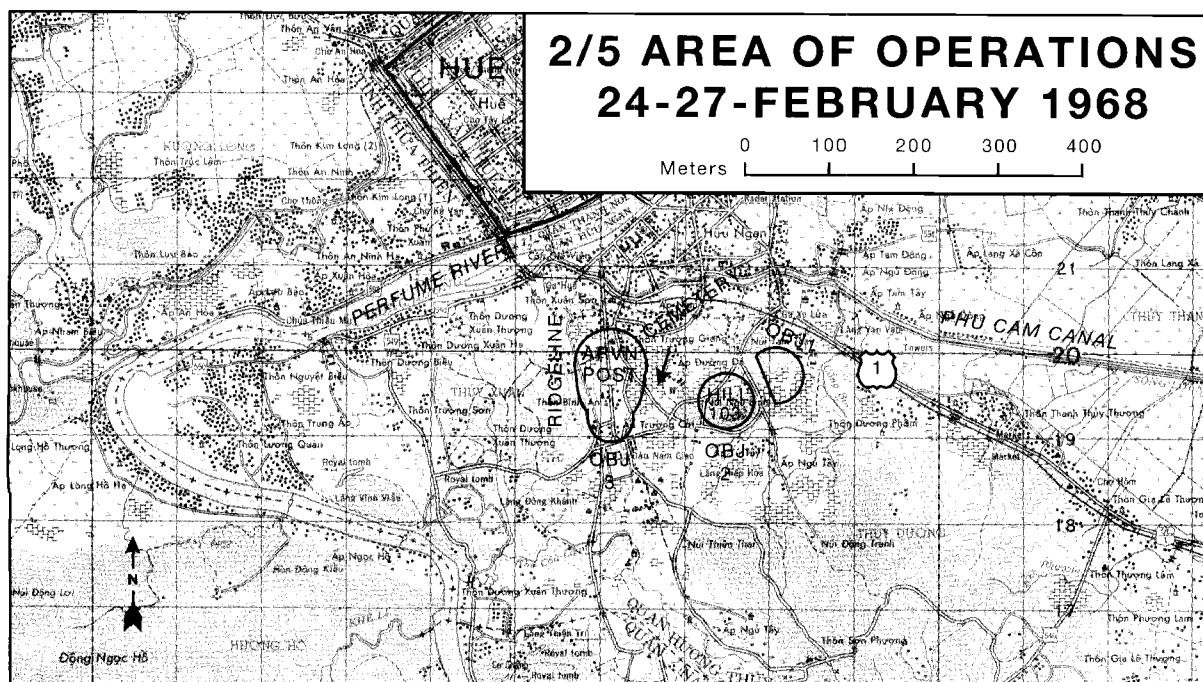
For the Marines, the operation, now officially called Hue City, lasted about another week. While the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines essentially mopped up in southern Hue,* the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, since 12 February, had conducted numerous company and platoon-size combat patrols south of the Phu Cam Canal. The battalion relieved the 101st ARVN Engineering Company that had been surrounded by NVA just southwest of the new city. On 24 February, the battalion began a

three-company sweep south of the city in conjunction with the two battalions of the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division. Under cover of darkness at 0300, the battalion advanced south of the Phu Cam Canal along Route 1 and then swung west and easily took its first objective around 0500, a piece of high ground 1,000 meters south of the canal and west of the highway. About an hour later, Company F secured its second objective, Hill 103, another 1,000 meters south, again without meeting any resistance.** On Hill 103, Lieutenant Colonel Ernest C. Cheatham, the battalion commander, established an outpost manned by an artillery forward observer team, a forward air controller, and an infantry squad from Company F for security. He then prepared to advance through a Vietnamese cemetery upon his main objective, an ARVN engineer battalion compound, about 1,500 meters to the west. The engineers had held out against repeated VC and NVA assaults since the beginning of the month.²³

Close to 0700, with Company G on the right, Company H on the left, and Company F following in trace, the battalion began its attack to secure the ARVN compound. Enemy mortars and automatic weapons fire forced the Marines to take cover among the tombs. After the battalion called in artillery and mortars on the suspected enemy positions, Company G, about 0830, reached the perimeter of the base and tied in with the ARVN engineers there. After discussing defensive arrangements with the ARVN base commander, the Company G commander, Captain Charles L. Meadows, reported back to Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham about the situation. The company commander warned Cheatham that the ARVN engineers had extensively mined the approaches to their compound and that a guide was required to pass through safely.

*First Lieutenant Ray L. Smith, the acting Company A commander, recalled that his company on 10 February together "with a militia of cooks etc., that they called 'B' Company," returned to the MACV compound and "began pushing east." At first, the battalion encountered little resistance as it covered two blocks and reached the soccer stadium. Smith remembered that they had a road to cross east of the stadium and "we bumped hard again." According to Smith, an ARVN major, who had been on leave and hiding from the NVA, joined them and informed the Marines that a North Vietnamese battalion headquarters was next door to his house. With clearances obtained from the Vietnamese authorities for "unobserved fire . . . for the first time," the Marine battalion called in supporting artillery and mortar missions. The following morning, the Marine infantry "went in" under a CS gas cover: "We had some fairly heavy resistance, but we cleared it out easily . . ." Smith remembered, "we found where they had their battalion headquarters," but the enemy bodies had been cleared out. After the taking of the headquarters, Smith wrote that Company A got some rest "and were used mostly for security until we left." 1stLt Ray Smith to Capt Gordon D. Barcheller, dtd 25Mar68, Encl to Col Gordon D. Barcheller, Comments on draft, dtd 10Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). Unfortunately, the 1/1 Command Chronology and journal file is silent on this incident. 1/1 ComdC, Feb68.

**Brigadier General Michael P. Downs, who as a captain commanded Company F, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, recalled that on the 24th, his company passed the remains of a Marine convoy that had been ambushed earlier in the month in an attempt to bring supplies to an isolated Marine artillery battery located at the Rock Quarry across the Perfume River from Phu Bai. Two men from his company who had been wounded and trying to rejoin the company were among the casualties: "It was a demoralizing site." BGen Michael P. Downs, Comments on draft, dtd 19Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Downs Comments. Colonel Robert C. V. Hughes, who had commanded the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, recalled the same convoys. He wrote: "All the vehicles were disabled and remained at the ambush site until control was reestablished later in the month." According to Hughes, the Marine artillery battery was not attacked during the entire period and occasionally initiated counter battery fire on enemy rocket launching sites in the Phu Bai sector. Col Robert C. V. Hughes, Comments on draft, n.d. [1995] (Vietnam Comment File).



Despite all precautions, the Navy corpsman with Cheatham's command group triggered a mine and was seriously wounded.²⁴

Throughout the remainder of the day, the Marine companies in their defensive positions in the compound and around the perimeter came under mortar and automatic fire from a VC-held Buddhist temple to the immediate south and a ridgeline to the west, overlooking the ARVN base. Cheatham observed that the Communist gunners had preregistered their mortars and automatic weapons fire on the key Marine defensive positions and terrain objectives. Deciding upon much the same tactics as he had already employed, the battalion commander planned upon enveloping the enemy's positions under cover of darkness and coming upon him in the morning.²⁵

The enemy, however, was not taken in by the Marine stratagem. Companies F and G moved out of the perimeter as planned and then waited for artillery and airstrikes to soften the enemy defenses. At 0700 on the 25th, the two companies launched their attacks to take the ridgeline and were met by mortar salvos and continuous and accurate automatic weapons fire. As one Marine infantryman with Company G observed, "everyplace we'd go they would mortar us." With supporting artillery fires, naval gunfire, and close air support, the Marine infantry finally reached the crest of the eastern portion of the ridgeline. In their efforts during the day, the two companies sustained casualties of 1

Marine killed and 11 wounded. The Marines, in turn, killed three of the enemy and took one prisoner. In the meantime, Company H, which had cleared out a hamlet in support of the Army airborne brigade operating to the south of the Marines, joined the other companies on the eastern ridgeline.²⁶

On the morning of the 26th, the Marine battalion continued the attack to clear the ridgeline. In scattered skirmishes, Companies F and G on the ridgeline killed about 20 NVA and took casualties of 2 Marine dead and 13 wounded. About 500 meters to the north, Company H, supported by air and artillery, maneuvered to take the last hill on the ridgeline, where the enemy remained entrenched in fixed positions. About 1330, enemy defenders, using mortars, machine guns, and 57mm recoilless rifles, forced Company H to pull back and call for an air strike. In the fighting, the Marines sustained casualties of one dead and five wounded and later counted six North Vietnamese bodies.²⁷

Resuming the attack after the air strike, Company H once more pushed forward. Again, the Communist troops doggedly resisted the Marine advance. About 1620, once more unable to make any further headway, the Marine company called upon air to take out the enemy defenses. Two flights of A-4 Skyhawks came in low and dropped their ordnance. Although the bombs knocked out two enemy mortars and two machine guns, killing about 20 North

Vietnamese troops, one fell short and burst near the Marines, killing four and wounding two. With darkness coming on, Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham recalled the company and waited for the next morning to renew the assault.

On the morning of the 27th, Marine air and artillery bombarded the enemy defenses. After the last fires had lifted, all three companies of the 2d Battalion rushed forward. Reaching the crest of the hill without encountering opposition, the Marines discovered that the enemy had departed during the night. Strewn around the hillscape were 14 enemy bodies. The Marine battalion then completed its sweep south of the new city the next day and prepared for a joint operation with the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines to the east and north of Hue.

Leaving the southern sector to the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne on the 29th, the two Marine battalions entered their new area of operations to cut off any NVA forces trying to make their way from Hue to the coast. Although encountering few enemy forces, the two battalions uncovered “fresh trench work along the route of advance, 3,000 meters long with 600 fighting holes.” Captain Michael P. Downs, the Company F commander, remembered a trench complex that “traveled in excess of five miles” with overhead cover every 15 meters. As Downs remarked, “that had to be a way to get significant reinforcements into the city.” The search for significant North Vietnamese forces proved fruitless. Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham observed, “we couldn’t close it [the loop around the enemy]. To be honest, we didn’t have enough people to close it.” On 2 March 1968, the Marines closed out Operation Hue City.²⁸

A Summing Up

The battle cost all sides dearly. Marine units of Task Force X-Ray sustained casualties of 142 dead and close to 1,100 wounded.* U.S. advisors with the 1st ARVN Division in Hue reported 333 South Vietnamese Army

troops killed, 1,773 wounded, and 30 missing in action. According to the U.S. Marine advisors with the Vietnamese Marine task force in Hue, the Vietnamese Marines suffered 88 killed, 350 wounded, and 1 missing in action. The 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) listed casualties of 68 killed and 453 wounded for their part in the battle while the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne showed 6 dead and 56 wounded in its battle account. Thus, all told, allied unit casualties totaled more than 600 dead and nearly 3,800 wounded and missing. Obviously the enemy did not escape unscathed. Allied estimates of NVA and VC dead ranged from 2,500 to 5,000 troops. According to the South Vietnamese, captured Communist documents admitted to 1,042 killed and an undisclosed number of wounded.²⁹

Just as speculative were the size and number of units that the allies engaged in the one month battle. The allied command, however, knew that the enemy was in Hue in force. South Vietnamese and U.S. intelligence officers initially identified at least three North Vietnamese regimental headquarters controlling subordinate units during the early fighting. These were the *4th*, *5th*, and *6th* NVA Regiments. Later, American and South Vietnamese units confirmed battalions from at least three more NVA regiments—the *29th* from the *325C* NVA Division and the *90th* and *803d* from the *324B* Division. The 1st Air Cavalry Division reported prisoners from yet another regiment, the *24th* Regiment, *304th* NVA Division. Allied intelligence estimated that from 16 to 18 enemy battalions took part in the battle for Hue in one form or another, not including VC local force units. It would be a safe bet that from 8,000 to 11,000 enemy troops participated in the fighting for Hue in the city itself or the approaches to the former imperial capital.³⁰

Until the battle for Hue, the allied order of battle estimates carried the battalions from the *29th* and the *90th* NVA as part of the besieging force at Khe Sanh, approximately 45 miles to the northwest. The *803d* Regiment was supposed to be in the eastern DMZ, another 45 miles to the north. One prisoner from the *803d*, captured on 23 February by Vietnamese Marines, told his captors that his unit on the night of 21–22 February made a forced march from Gio Linh District to the Citadel. Although wounded himself, he spoke of the high morale and fairly low casualties in his unit. On the 23d, he stated that his unit received orders to withdraw, but did not know why. In the hasty departure, he lost his way and ran into the South Vietnamese troops.³¹

*The breakdown of casualties among the Marine infantry battalions are as follows: The 1st Battalion, 5th Marines sustained 67 dead and 403 wounded. The incomplete 2d Battalion, 5th Marines after-action report does not show total Marine casualties, but the battalion's command chronology for February shows 65 Marines killed and 421 wounded. It can be assumed that over 90 percent of these casualties occurred during the Hue City fighting. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines did not submit an after-action report for Hue, but its command chronology for February reflects 17 dead and 154 wounded. Again it can be assumed that the bulk of the casualties occurred in the Hue City fighting. 1/5 AAR Hue City; 2/5 ComdC, Feb68; 1/1 ComdC, Feb68.



Photo courtesy of Col Talman C. Budd II, USMC (Ret)

The South Vietnamese Marine Task Force Alpha commander, the officer on the right holding a map, confers with officers of the 1st Vietnamese Marine Battalion west of the city, after leaving Hue.

The allies remained unsure about the North Vietnamese command and control for the battle of Hue. U.S. after action reports referred to a division-size force, but never identified any particular enemy division headquarters. Lieutenant Colonel Pham Van Khoa, the South Vietnamese Thua Thien Province chief, who remained in hiding until rescued by American Marines,* accidentally overheard a conversation among some enemy officers. According to Khoa, the North Vietnamese mentioned a division taking part in the battle and the division headquarters was "in an unknown location south of the city of Hue inside a pagoda." Khoa could not remember the number of the division, but recalled that it ended with a 4. In all probability, however, Khoa confused the division headquarters with the *4th NVA Regiment*. Given the disparity of so many regiments from so many different divisions, allied intelligence officers believed that a forward headquarters of the *Tri-Thien-Hue Front* under a North Vietnamese general officer directed the NVA Hue offensive.³²

Given both the resources that the North Vietnamese put into the battle and the tenacity with which they fought, it was obvious that the Hue campaign was

a major component of the entire Tet offensive. According to an enemy account, the North Vietnamese military command in planning the offensive took into consideration that the U.S. and South Vietnamese had concentrated their forces in the north, expecting an attack along Route 9. It viewed Hue a weak link in the allied defenses in the northern two provinces. As the North Vietnamese author wrote: "The enemy knew nothing of our strategy; by the time our forces approached the city of Hue, the enemy still had not taken any specific defensive measures."³³

Once in Hue, the North Vietnamese were there to stay. The Communists established their own civil government and their cadres rounded up known government officials, sympathizers, and foreigners including American civilians and military personnel in the parts of the city they controlled. After the recapture of Hue, South Vietnamese authorities exhumed some 3,000 bodies thrown into hastily dug graves. In all probability, these were the victims of the Communist roundups. Although the North Vietnamese admitted the tracking down and punishing of "hoodlum ring-leaders," they claimed most of the reported civilian deaths were the result of happenstance, exaggerations by the South Vietnamese, or caused by the allies. The true sufferers in the battle were the people of Hue.

*See Chapter 10.



Top is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190581 and bottom photo is courtesy of Col Talman C. Budd II, USMC (Ret)
At top, a bound North Vietnamese prisoners captured in the fighting for Hue are waiting to board the Army "Huey" helicopter in the background for evacuation and later interrogation. In bottom photo, a South Vietnamese Marine colonel, the Assistant Commandant of the Vietnamese Marine Corps, briefs the press on the battle for Hue and prisoners captured by the South Vietnamese Marines.



Some estimates held that over 80 percent of the structures in the city sustained damage or were destroyed. Out of a population of about 140,000, more than 116,000 people were homeless and 5,800 were either dead or missing. According to most reports, Hue was a devastated city.^{34*}

From the allied perspective, the struggle for Hue was a near thing, especially in the first few days. Only the failure of the North Vietnamese to overrun the *Mang Ca* and MACV compounds permitted the allies to retain a toehold in both the Citadel and the new city. With the holding of these two positions, the Americans and South Vietnamese were able to bring in reinforcements to mount a counteroffensive. The battalion commander of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, Lieutenant Colonel Marcus J. Gravel, observed that the enemy had oriented his defenses to fend off forces coming into the city: "When we got in and were able to stay in there in strength . . . we fought him from the inside out." Even then, if the enemy had blown the An Cuu Bridge across Route 1 on the first day, the Marines would not have been able to bring in their initial battalions and supplies into the city.³⁵

Fortuitously for both the Americans and the South Vietnamese, the 1st Air Cavalry Division had arrived in northern I Corps before Tet and was in position to commit eventually a four-battalion brigade to the battle. Overcoming strong enemy opposition, including elements of three separate regiments, on 25 February, the 3d Brigade reached the walls of the Citadel, closing out the enemy avenues of approach to the city from the west. By this time, the American and South Vietnamese forces had overwhelming superiority and the North Vietnamese units, fighting a rear guard action,

abandoned the struggle to hold on to the city. Major General Tolson, the 1st Cavalry commander, remembered that General Truong told him that if "I could ever get the Cav to the walls of Hue, the enemy would 'bug out.'" The problem was that it took 22 days for the 3d Brigade to fight its way there. Major Talman C. Budd II, the U.S. Marine advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Task Force, later wrote that if the 1st Cavalry had been reinforced or replaced "to enable sealing off the west wall sooner, . . . [it] would have shortened the struggle to reach the south wall."³⁶

Although the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese harassed ship traffic in the Perfume River and the other water routes into the city, they made no serious attempt to close the waterways. Even with the An Cuu Bridge closed for over a week, the Marines had stockpiled and brought in enough supplies by LCU to support operations in both the Citadel and southern Hue. By 14 February, with a pontoon bridge in place over the canal, the road network into the new city, at least, was once more open. On two occasions, nevertheless, because the NVA sank one LCU and temporarily shut down the boat traffic on the Perfume River, Major Thompson in the Citadel stopped his battalion's advance because of a shortage of 106mm and 90mm rounds for his recoilless rifles and tanks.³⁷ If the enemy had made a stronger effort to cut both the water and land lines of communications, the outcome of the struggle for Hue would have been less predictable.

Despite marginal flying conditions that curtailed resupply missions and the haphazard attempts of the enemy to cut the lines of communications, the Marines eventually built up their logistic facilities in Hue. Marine helicopters eventually lifted more than 500 tons of all types of supplies into Hue while five Navy LCUs brought in another 400 tons. After the opening of Route 1 on 12 February, Marine trucks from Company B, 7th Motor Transportation Battalion carried the bulk of the resupplies into the city. More than 100 truck convoys made the round trip from Phu Bai to Hue.³⁸

The 1st Marines first established its logistic support area (LSA) in the city next to the LCU ramp. Because of the LSA's exposure to enemy mortar fire and snipers, the Marines moved it to a South Vietnamese government complex next to the MACV compound. With the stockpiling of supplies resulting in a premium for space, the 1st Marines then relocated the LSA to the Tu Do Soccer Stadium several blocks to the east of the MACV buildings. On 22 February, Force Logistic Sup-

* Former *Washington Post* reporter Peter Braestrup, an eyewitness to the battle, cautioned in his book against overdramatic comparisons that appeared in the media of the Hue battle with World War II battles. According to Braestrup, "to the uninitiated or imaginative observer on the ground, it [Hue] suggested Seoul or Stalingrad. . . . Actually Hue got off fairly lightly by World War II or Korean War standards for three-week urban battles." Braestrup, *Big Story*, vol. 1, p. 202. For contrasting views of the Hue "massacres," see Douglas Pike, "Viet Cong Strategy, New Face of Terror," and D. Gareth Porter, "The 1968 Hue Massacre" in Hue Tet Folder, A&S Files, Indochina Archives. William D. Ehrhart a former Marine who served with the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines in Hue and has written extensively on the Vietnam experience, commented that he personally saw a lot of dead civilians, killed not by intent, "but only because they were in the midst of some of the fiercest fighting of the war." While admitting he did not know "what actually happened," Ehrhart believes "there is more room for doubt than your account (and most others suggest)." William D. Ehrhart, Comments on draft, dtd 23Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File). The authors of this work feel no need to change the description in the text.



Top is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190503 and bottom photo is courtesy of Col Talman C. Budd II, USMC (Ret)
The fighting for Hue caused extensive damage in the city. Top, the ruins of the Hue market place can be seen, while below is a view of the south wall of the Citadel taken from the west wall. The devastation upon the homes and buildings in between the two walls is obvious.





Top photo is courtesy of Col Talman C. Budd II, USMC (Ret) and bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190492
After the destruction of the bridges Marines depended upon river traffic for resupply. At top is an aerial view of the river after the battle with several damaged river craft. The picture was taken from a helicopter whose machine gun can be seen in the forefront. Below, Marine infantry have M16 rifles and M60 machine guns at the ready to return enemy sniper or harassing fires from on board a LCM (landing craft, mechanized) carrying 105mm ammunition.



port Group (FLSG) Alpha took over from the 1st Marines the running of the LSA.

In his after-action report, General LaHue, the Task Force X-Ray commander, observed that his command made few if any logistic innovations, but implemented some procedures “which were necessary and effective.” According to LaHue, these usually “involved force feeding and preplanning.” Because of the nature of the fighting, the 1st Marines and the committed battalions found it almost impossible to anticipate their needs in advance. The result was that their “requests escalated quickly from routine, to priority, to emergency.” Based on the experience of the first four days of combat, Task Force X-Ray then prestaged a “balanced package of usually needed supplies. As soon as higher priority cargo was delivered, these would then be delivered without a request.” The Task Force commander credited the logistic support with enabling the infantry battalions to clear the city.³⁹

With the low ceilings limiting the number of helicopter flights, medical support and evacuation also operated under different and more difficult circumstances. It soon became apparent to the 1st Marines for the need of forward medical facilities. Colonel Hughes established the regimental aid station at the MACV compound with eight doctors. The regimental facility provided “definitive” emergency care and control and coordination of all medical evacuation. It also served as a battalion aid station for the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines. The other two battalions, the 1st Battalion and 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, each had its own aid station. Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham, the 2d Battalion commander, declared that medical evacuation was “a throwback to World War II. [I] Had my doctor . . . one block behind the frontline treating the people right there.”⁴⁰

The Marines used trucks, mechanical mules, and any available transportation to carry the wounded back to the treatment facilities. According to the 1st Marines account, it averaged about two to three minutes to bring a wounded man from the battle site to an aid station. It took another two to three minutes from the aid station to the helicopter landing zone for further evacuation if required. Eventually, the regimental surgeon established two categories of wounded to be evacuated by helicopter—Class I, emergency medevac, weather permitting; and Class II, immediate evacuation. Army helicopters assisted in Class I while Marine helicopters had sole responsibility for the emergency Class II, “which they accomplished under severe weather conditions, and with great risk to the heli-

copter crews, often times flying with a 100-foot ceiling and 0 visibility.”⁴¹

On the south side of the Perfume River, only two casualties who arrived alive at the forward aid stations died. These were two men from the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines who died minutes after their arrival, one of gunshot wounds (GSW) to the head and the other of a wound to the neck with “severance of both carotid arteries.” Across the river, where the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines was dependant upon air or water evacuation, six men died “after emergency care while awaiting helicopter evacuation during severely inclement weather.” The battalion surgeon declared, however, that four “would have died regardless of evacuation because of the nature of their wounds, and of the remaining two it is equivocal whether they could have been saved if evacuated quickly.” In the Hue City battle, like all operations in Vietnam, despite the problems with helicopter evacuation, if a Marine reached an aid station alive, his chances of survival were close to 99 percent.^{42*}

One other problem that the allies faced was population control. With the widespread destruction in the city, the estimated 116,000 homeless had to be fed and temporarily housed. Much of the population just fled the city and took refuge with relatives and friends in the surrounding villages. After the initial confusion, both U.S. and South Vietnamese agencies began to set up refugee centers. U.S. Army Major Jack E. Walker, a subsector advisor, recalled that his superior about a week after the NVA struck told him that he was now the “CORDS ‘refugee man.’” According to Walker, he surveyed the situation and discovered that he had 5,000 refugees in a Catholic church and another 17,000 at Hue University. Another 40,000 displaced people were in the Citadel sector. Walker initially concerned himself with three tasks: restoring city services including water and power; eliminating health hazards including burying the dead; and securing food. With the assistance of the local Catholic hierarchy and American resources and personnel, Walker and his people began attacking all of these problems. By the end of February, a full-time refugee administrator was in place and local government slowly began to function once more.⁴³

*Brigadier General Michael P. Downs observed that the 99 percent chance of survival after reaching a battalion aid station was probably true after 4 February. He stated he had at least two Marines of his company before that date die of wounds after being evacuated to an aid station. Downs Comments. Those two Marines, however, may have been the two who died referred to in the text.



Top photo is courtesy of Col Talman C. Budd II, USMC (Ret) and the bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A372930

The civilian population of Hue was caught in the middle of the battle. Top, survivors from the house-to-house fighting in the Citadel attempt to make themselves as comfortable as possible on a dirt embankment, apparently in one of the parks of the old city. Below, Marines lead and assist South Vietnamese refugees carrying what belongings they can away from the combat area.



In the first two weeks there was hardly any semblance of public order. The authors of the South Vietnamese official history of Tet wrote: "Thievery and looting were widespread. War victims stole from their fellow sufferers. All deserted houses were emptied of valuables. Robbed victims sought to steal from others." At least one Marine battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel, complained about the "ARVN looting behind us."⁴⁴

More serious, from an American perspective, were reports that U.S. Marines were also involved in the looting. The Associated Press was supposed to have a photograph of an American soldier or Marine carrying a large painting under his arm. A Swiss newspaperman reported to MACV that he saw "numerous breaches of discipline which would not be tolerated in the Swiss Army." He claimed that a Marine tried to sell him a Longines watch and that he saw other Marines help themselves to photographic equipment from a partially destroyed store. The newspaper man came across another group of Marines near the Royal Palace manning a strongpoint, and "drinking whiskey, cognac, and beer, and cooking chickens." Moreover, he observed several Marines "amusing themselves by shooting at dogs, cats and chickens." A CORDS official told Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker that Marines vandalized the offices of the manager and deputy manager of the Hue power plant, alleging they took as well "whiskey, piasters, and dollars."⁴⁵

On 26 February, General Westmoreland ordered both Generals Abrams and Cushman to give their "personal attention" to this potentially explosive issue. In turn, General Cushman asked both the commanding generals of Task Force X-Ray, Brigadier General LaHue, and the 1st Marine Division, Major General Donn J. Robertson, to inform him of all measures taken by members of their commands to avoid such incidents: "Looting obviously cannot be tolerated, and we must insure that every step is taken to prevent it. Officers and NCOs must be held responsible for looting by their subordinates." For his part, General Abrams assigned the MACV (Forward) staff judge advocate to begin a formal investigation. At the same time, General Robertson sent an attorney from the 1st Division legal office, Captain Bernard A. Allen, to Hue to assist in the probe.⁴⁶

On 2 March 1968, General Abrams reported to Westmoreland the results of the investigation. He first disposed of the question of the Associated Press photograph. According to the AP Bureau heads in Vietnam, they knew of no such picture. They did remember a

photograph taken before Tet of a 1st Cavalry soldier carrying a religious painting of the Virgin Mary in a sector south of Da Nang. After interviewing all commanders, newsmen, and CORDS personnel, the investigators concluded that "probably some small articles were looted by the Marines . . . however, these reported incidents were in extreme contrast to extensive and systematic looting by ARVN troops and civilians." Captain Allen learned that ARVN troops employed trucks to carry away their booty. Colonel Khoa, the Thua Thien Province Chief, had received no formal complaints from South Vietnamese citizens against the Marines. General Abrams observed: "At this time, investigation has failed to produce sufficient evidence upon which to base prosecution for any instance of looting by U.S. personnel."^{47*}

Abrams generally commended the Marine commanders. He observed that Colonel Hughes of the 1st Marines very early took "positive measures to deter looting." On 4 February, Hughes told all officers and NCOs that "looting and pillage would not be tolerated." He directed that battalion and company commanders carry out periodic "shakedowns" of personnel. Many valuables were turned into the regimental CP and returned to the rightful owner. Hughes did authorize the commandeering and "cannibalization of vehicles as it became necessary to transport casualties."^{48**} He also ordered the shooting of dogs, cats, and pigs because the animals were "eating bodies, both of U.S. and [Vietnamese] . . . which could not be immediately retrieved because of the tactical situation." Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham stated that in the University his men used blankets and broke windows "to avoid fragmentation from incoming rounds." General Abrams concluded "Marine commanders appear to have taken reasonable measures to prevent looting and needless destruction."⁴⁸

Obviously in a fluid situation and close-quarter street fighting such as Hue, commanders did not have absolute control or know all of the activities of their men. One Marine lance corporal reported, "anything that was of any value we took . . . to keep for souvenirs and snuff." He mentioned random destruction caused by Marines in the University of microscopes and other

* Brigadier General Paul G. Graham, the former 1st Marine Divisions Operations Officer or G-3, commented that looting "was not a problem as far as the Division was concerned . . ." Graham Comments

** Peter Braestrup, the former *Washington Post* reporter commented that he remembered reading a sign "'Hotel Company Kicks Ass' . . . on a seized van, used to haul supplies." Peter Braestrup, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94-Jan95] (Vietnam Comment File).

laboratory equipment. The lance corporal was particularly amused by the troops seizing stray vehicles such as motor scooters, trucks, and even jeeps: "A grunt . . . would just jump on it and start riding it around the streets . . . that was pretty funny—right in the middle of this war riding up and down the streets in motor scooters and even a 1964 black Mercedes goes flying down the street filled up with a bunch of Marines in it." A Navy corpsman with the Marines recorded in his diary: "Looting is widespread. The ARVN's wait until the Marines secure an area and then move in to loot. The Marines do well for themselves also."⁴⁹

Although admitting to the validity of some of these accounts, Marine commanders in Hue believed that their men acted with general restraint considering all the temptations confronting them. Five years later, Lieutenant Colonel Gravel recalled, "we took things to our use; I wouldn't kid you about that. I saw some things and I saw that they were returned." He remembered: "We used bedding, we used food, we used alco-

hol that was there; but there was no looting to one's own advantage. There were a couple of attempts at it, but word got around and I daresay there was damned little, if any." In a similar vein, Lieutenant Colonel Cheatham and his company commanders made much the same case. At the Marine Corps Schools, in July 1973, Captain Meadows, the Company G commander, related: "We did take things for our use . . . blankets, food, water. We must have taken every candle in that side of the city for illumination for our own use at night. These things—you want to call it looting? O.K., we looted." Despite some admitted pilfering of small items such as watches and money, all of the company commanders denied there was any real problem. As Captain Meadows concluded: "Your troops don't have time to pick up big things to carry them around. They have other, more pressing things [to do]."⁵⁰

Some independent accounts supported the contention of the Marine commanders that their troops acted with reasonable forbearance in the city. The

Marine PFC James M. Jones from Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines assists a Vietnamese child to climb out of a window of her house to escape the house-to-house fighting in the new city. Marines did what they could for the hapless civilian population caught up in the fighting.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371127



Washington Post carried one story describing Marines holed up in a residence that obviously belonged to a wealthy man. The house contained a fully stocked liquor cabinet, furniture, television set, and various other furnishings. About 0700, as the Marines sat around eating their breakfast of cold C-Rations, the owner's servants arrived with a note asking permission to remove the household goods. It took four servants three round trips to carry out the items. The only things that were missing were the beer that the Marines had drunk and one broken bottle of Johnny Walker whisky. In another report, an American volunteer worker, who had been visiting Vietnamese friends in Hue when the offensive erupted, described his rescue by Marines from Company B, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines. His friends provided him with sanctuary in their house while the North Vietnamese held the city. As the fighting intensified, the "family heard soldiers firing nearby" and hid the American under one of the beds. According to the newspaper account, one Marine reached the side of the house and shouted: "Are there any VC in there?" The volunteer scrambled outside and identified himself. An unbelieving Captain Fernandez Jennings, Jr., the company commander, wondered aloud about the Marine asking if there were VC inside. When assured that was the case, Jennings muttered to himself, "It's a great war."⁵¹

The suddenness and the extent of the enemy offensive in Hue caught both the South Vietnamese and American commands offstride. At first underestimating the strength of the enemy in Hue, the allies sent too few troops to drive the attackers out. Although the South Vietnamese and U.S. commands in I Corps eventually deployed additional units piecemeal into the Citadel and the southern city and inserted the 3d Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division to the west, command and control and coordination remained a problem until the last weeks of the operation. In a sense, Task Force X-Ray, the 1st ARVN Division, and the 3d Brigade all fought their own battles in isolation from one another. Outside of General Cushman of III MAF and General Abrams, MACV (Forward), there was not even an overall American, let alone single commander of the Hue campaign. Both Cushman and

Abrams were at too high a level and distracted by Khe Sanh to focus much of their attention, except periodically, to the Hue situation. From his headquarters at the *Mang Ca* compound, General Truong, the 1st ARVN Division commander, did control the South Vietnamese effort in the Citadel. Major Talman C. Budd II, the U.S. Marine advisor to the Vietnamese Marine Task Force A, observed, however, that the lack of an overall commander resulted in no general battle plan and competition for supporting fires, air, and logistic support. A Task Force X-Ray staff officer sardonically remarked that by the time Army Brigadier General Davis of the 1st Cavalry Division became the Hue coordinator, "he didn't have anything to coordinate, but he had the name." The command relationships in northern I Corps under MACV (Forward) were tenuous at best.^{52*}

With the date approaching for the end of his stay at Phu Bai in early March, General Abrams provided General Westmoreland his assessment of the enemy situation in the north. Abrams was less concerned about Khe Sanh, but worried about the NVA using the A Shau Valley and Route 547 leading from the valley to "turn our flank." He also expressed some anxiety about the recent move of the *803d NVA Regiment* into the Hue vicinity. Abrams stated that and the "continuing movement of [NVA] replacements to coastal plains supports my belief that Hue is the objective he [the enemy] would most like to have." The MACV [Forward] commander acknowledged, however, that the NVA might "settle for an objective of less importance should the opportunity present itself." He believed both sides were fighting for time and that "both sides require time to overcome manpower and logistical deficiencies." In the long run, however, he believed that time was on the allied side. General Cushman and General Westmoreland concurred in Abrams assessment. All three American commanders believed that the recapture of Hue was only a lull before the North Vietnamese launched another wave of attacks.⁵³

*See Chapter 13 for further discussion of command relations in northern I Corps.

PART III
AFTER TET,
KHE SANH,
AND MINI-TET

CHAPTER 13

Post-Tet in I Corps

*The Immediate Ramifications of the Tet Offensive—Readjustment in I Corps
Readjustments in the U.S. I Corps Command Structure—Planning for the Future
March Operations in the DMZ Sector—March Operations in the Rest of I Corps—Regaining the Initiative*

The Immediate Ramifications of the Tet Offensive

By the end of February and the beginning of March with the securing of the city of Hue, the enemy's countrywide Tet offensive had about shot its initial bolt. According to American estimates, the Communists lost about half of their attacking force, more than 40,000 from an estimated 84,000 men. In I Corps alone, from January through March 1968, Lieutenant General Robert Cushman, the III MAF Commander, later calculated that allied forces killed over 30,000 of the enemy, the equivalent of 74 infantry battalions.^{1*}

The Communist command, itself, admitted to several shortcomings. As early as 1 February 1968, the Central Office of South Vietnam, the Viet Cong governing body, issued a circular to its subordinate commands. According to the Communist leadership, "we failed to seize a number of primary objectives and to completely destroy mobile and defensive units of the enemy." The memorandum blamed the Viet Cong military forces for failure "to hold the occupied areas," and, moreover, held the political cadre accountable for not motivating the "people to stage uprisings and break the enemy oppressive control." In *Military Region 5*, which included both Quang Ngai City and Da Nang, the Communist headquarters conceded that its troops and cadre within the cities were not strong enough to assist the main force units outside of the cities. In an official history, the Communist author acknowledged that the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese attacking units "did not meet the basic requirements that had been set forth." Contrary to the enemy expectations, the South Vietnamese Army had not disintegrated and in many sectors acquitted itself reasonably well, especially on the defensive.²

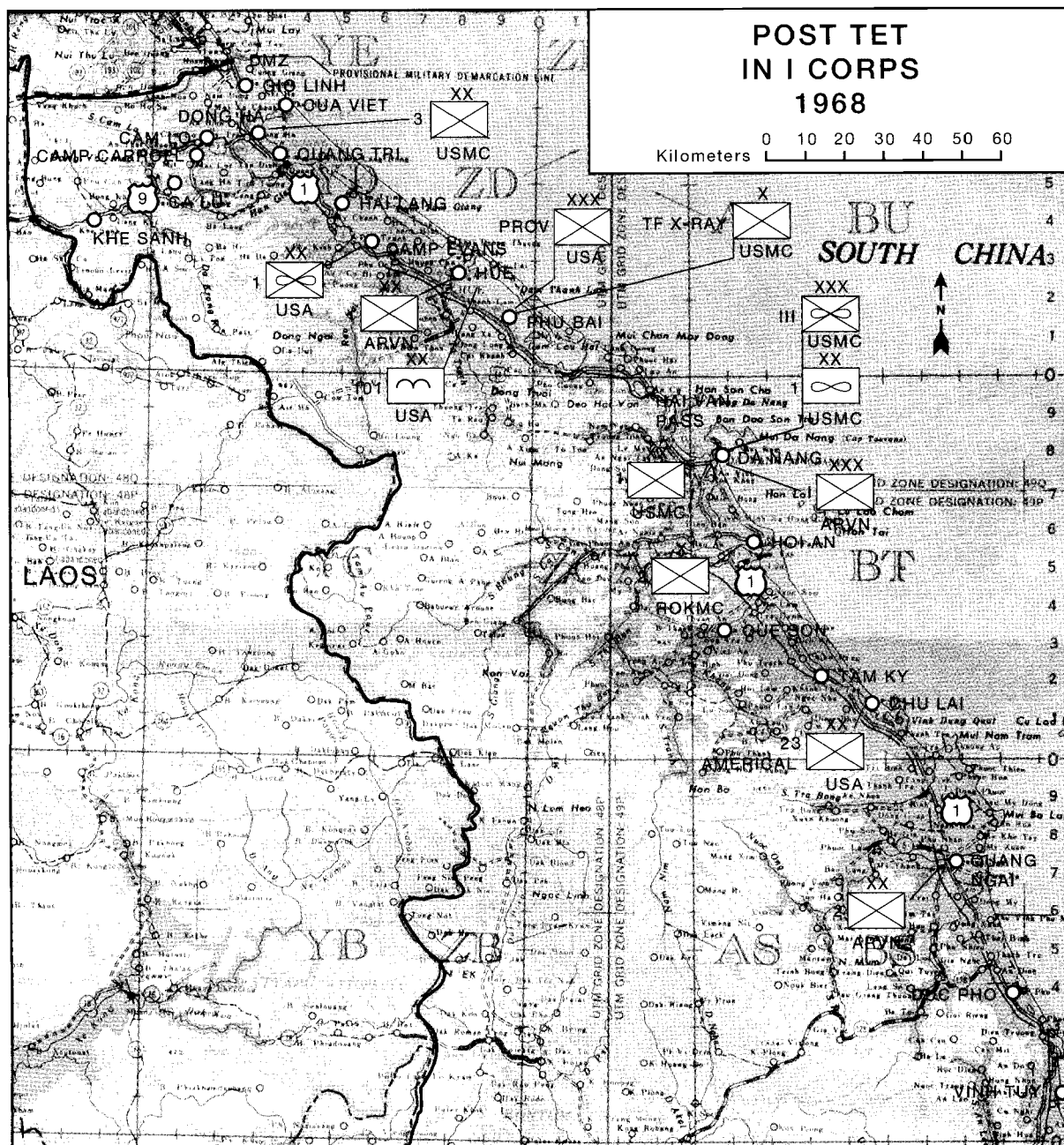
Still the tenor of the Communist communiques was one of defiance. They all claimed the achievement of

great victories and made references to final victory for their cause. At the same time, however, the enemy leadership warned their supporters: "Our people's struggle has stepped into an extremely tense and fierce phase and is developing very rapidly." They no longer spoke of a short-term campaign, but that "the General Offensive and General Uprising will not last for only a few days, but that it is a phase of a general attack against the enemy." One phase was over and another was to begin.³

The American military was also examining the consequences of the enemy's offensive. While confident that Tet was a major military defeat for the Communists, U.S. commanders were well aware of the cost to their side. Allied casualties during the fighting totaled in excess of 12,000, with about two-thirds suffered by the ARVN. The battle of Hue was a near thing, especially in the first few days. While expecting an attack, especially in the north around Khe Sanh or possibly the DMZ, General Westmoreland and the MACV staff had underestimated the breadth and extent of the enemy general offensive. Some 600,000 civilians were now refugees, about 100,000 in I Corps alone. The pacification effort had sustained a major setback. In mid-February, Marine Brigadier General John R. Chaisson, the director of the MACV Combat Operations Center, observed in a letter home, "the damage in the cities and to the economy is staggering. ARVN will be somewhat less than effective for weeks." He then wrote, however, "... there is a general tightening up of everything, and if the guys on top don't panic this could be the turning point of the war—even though he [the enemy] initiated it for us." Chaisson expressed the sentiments of many of the MACV commanders including both Generals Westmoreland and Cushman.⁴

In Washington, the Johnson administration also began its reevaluation of the Vietnam War in light of the enemy offensive. Other factors also clouded the situation. On 23 January, North Korean gunboats captured the U.S. intelligence ship, *USS Pueblo* (AGER-2),

*Cushman's statistics include figures before and after Tet and, therefore, give a somewhat distorted picture of the enemy's Tet casualties. It, nevertheless, is indicative of the intensity of the fighting in the I Corps sector during the Tet period and of the enemy's losses.



off the Korean coast and took the officers and crew prisoner.* In response, the administration called up 14,000

*The North Koreans claimed territorial waters off their coast up to 20 miles, while the U.S. only recognized Korean territorial waters of 3 miles. According to the official inquiry the *Pueblo* was boarded approximately 15 miles off the Korean coast. CinCPacFlt, Findings of Fact, Opinion, etc. of Court of Inquiry, Case of *Pueblo* (AGER-2), n.d., *Pueblo* File, Post 1Jan46 Comd File (OAB, NHD). See also Center of Naval History, Comments on draft, dtd Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File) and VAdm Edwin B. Hooper, *Mobility, Support, Endurance, A Story*

Navy and Air Force Reserves, so as not to divert any active forces from the Southeast Asia battlefield. Continued domestic opposition to the war, often led by influential members of his own party, also served to distract the President's attention. Although forewarned about a possible enemy offensive, "it was more massive," than President Johnson, like Westmoreland, "had anticipated."⁵

⁵ *of Naval Operational Logistics in the Vietnam War, 1965-1968* (Washington: Naval Historical Division, 1972), p. 219.

If possible, the mood in Washington was grimmer than that in Saigon. While the President rejected proposals by the Joint Chiefs to intensify the air war over Haiphong and Hanoi, he was willing to rush ground reinforcements, if necessary, to prevent the fall of the Marine base at Khe Sanh. On 3 February, at the behest of the President, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Earle G. Wheeler, asked Westmoreland, "if there is any reinforcement or help that we can give you." In reply, Westmoreland only requested another squadron of C-130 cargo aircraft and air-drop equipment. At the same time, Westmoreland asked his staff to make a study of the long-range requirements. At this point, Wheeler rather tartly observed that the long-range could wait, "we can handle only one major problem at a time." The Chairman emphasized that the Joint Chiefs and the President were concerned about Westmoreland's "immediate requirements stemming from the present situation in Vietnam." In another cable, Wheeler warned the MACV commander: "The United States Government is not prepared to accept a defeat in South Vietnam. In summary, if you need more troops, ask for them."⁶

These exchange of messages between Westmoreland and Wheeler developed into a strange colloquy in which the Chairman eventually maneuvered Westmoreland into requesting significant additional forces which would require a callup of the Reserves. On 12 February, at a meeting at the White House, however, President Johnson delayed his final decision, but approved the immediate deployment of a brigade of the U.S. Army 82d Airborne Division and the 27th Marines to Vietnam. Both the Army Brigade and the Marine regiment were to reinforce General Cushman's forces in I Corps.^{7*}

Readjustment in I Corps

By the end of February, the reinforcements for I Corps were in place or on their way. On 10 and 12 February, the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel John E. Greenwood, at Hawaii embarked on board three Navy ships, the USS *Vancouver* (LPD 2), the USS *Bexar* (APA 237), and the *Washburn* (AKA 108). Originally scheduled to participate in two landing exercises on Okinawa, the newly formed BLT received a change of orders while at sea on 13 February, as a result of the President's decision, to

proceed to Da Nang. Between 14 and 21 February, the rest of RLT (Regimental Landing Team) 27 deployed by sea and air from Camp Pendleton, California to Da Nang. U.S. Air Force Military Airlift Command planes flew more than 3,300 men of the regiment together with 1,196 short tons of their equipment from California to Vietnam. By 17 February, the 27th Marines headquarters, under Colonel Adolph G. Schwenk, Jr., together with those of BLTs 2/27, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Louis J. Bacher, and 3/27, under Lieutenant Colonel Tullis J. Woodham, Jr., opened their command posts at the Da Nang base. The forces arriving as part of RLT 27 also included personnel from the artillery battalion, 2d Battalion, 13th Marines, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Rhys J. Phillips, Jr. On 21 February, the USS *Thomaston* (LSD 28) departed San Diego with the surface elements of the RLT, some 200 personnel and over 5,000 tons of equipment for Vietnam. By the end of the month, the 1st Battalion had joined the other two battalions of the regiment at Da Nang. General Cushman later declared that he had not known the 27th Marines was available and that he had not requested them, but that they arrived in "response to overall requirements set by Westmoreland." As the 1st Marine Division assistant division commander and Task Force X-Ray commander, Brigadier General Foster C. LaHue, remembered, however, III MAF was "happy to get them [RLT 27]."⁸

Throughout this period, General Westmoreland continued to deploy U.S. Army units north. From mid-January through the end of February, MACV reinforced III MAF with over 20,000 Army troops in I Corps, including support units. The combat forces included the 1st Air Cavalry Division headquarters and two brigades, two brigades of the 101st Airborne Division, and the 3d Brigade of the 82d Airborne Division, which, like the 27th Marines, had just arrived in Vietnam from the United States. First located at Chu Lai in Quang Tin Province under the Americal Division, elements of the 82d Airborne brigade then joined the 1st Marine Division Task Force X-Ray in the Phu Bai Vital Area in Thua Thien Province.⁹

By the end of February, III MAF numbered nearly 129,000 officers and men, an increase of nearly 12,000 over the previous month. These figures included over 82,000 Marines and nearly 45,000 U.S. Army personnel. In Quang Tri Province, encompassing U.S. units at Khe Sanh, the DMZ sector, and south of Quang Tri City, there were 16 maneuver battalions (infantry, amphibian tractor, and tank), 13 Marine and 3 Army.

* Chapter 27 will go into further detail on the manpower decisions of February 1968 and the question about the activation of the Reserves.

Sixteen battalions, 12 Army and 4 Marine, operated in Thua Thien Province. Seven Marine battalions, including the 3d Amphibian Tractor battalion, stayed in the Da Nang area of operations while five Army battalions from the U.S. Army Americal Division continued Operation Wheeler/Wallowa in the Nui Loc Son sector. Of the remaining eight battalions of the Americal, four were at Chu Lai and the rest split between Quang Ngai and Duc Pho.¹⁰

With the possible exception of the Khe Sanh sector and continuing harassment of Marine positions along the eastern DMZ, by the end of the month, the enemy tempo of operations throughout I Corps had diminished. Even along the DMZ, the intensity of the NVA attacks no longer matched those at the beginning of February. In fact, the number of ground assaults in February actually declined while the NVA confined most of its activity to artillery, rocket, and mortar bombardment. Taking advantage of the apparent lull in the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong Tet offensive, the American commanders continued to make adjustments and to take the fight to the enemy throughout the I Corps sector.¹¹

In southern I Corps, the Americal Division continued with Operation Muscatine in Quang Ngai Province. For the most part, the Army units experienced relatively light contact except for two significant clashes with a VC battalion. In the first, on 12 February, Americal Task Force Barker conducted a combined operation with the 2d ARVN Division and engaged in a five-hour firefight. The Americal task force reported killing 78 of the enemy with the loss of 1 U.S. soldier. Eleven days later, on the 23d, Company A, 3d Battalion, 1st Infantry apparently encountered the same enemy unit with almost the same results. The Americans claimed to have killed 68 of the enemy at a cost of the lives of 2 U.S. soldiers. For the entire month, the Americal Division in the operation killed over 270 of the enemy and sustained casualties of 13 killed and 124 wounded. The division also reported recovering 35 individual enemy weapons and accidentally killing 8 innocent civilians caught in the crossfire between American and VC units.¹²

Further north, in the Wheeler/Wallowa area of operations, the Americal Division also accounted for a significant number of enemy casualties. On 9 February, in the Que Son Valley, elements of the division engaged a battalion of the 29th NVA Regiment. In little over seven hours, the American soldiers killed more than 200 of the enemy and recovered 53 individual and 13 crew-served weapons. Near the end of the month,

1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry and a troop of the 7th Squadron, 17th Cavalry ran into another fairly large Communist unit and accounted for 148 enemy dead and recovered 32 individual and 9 crew-served weapons. For the month, the Army units in the operation sustained casualties of 98 dead and 455 wounded while in turn killing nearly 1,200 of the enemy, taking 24 prisoners, and recovering 274 individual and 37 crew-served weapons. The division acknowledged that 92 "innocent civilians" also inadvertently met their death as a result of the operation. Despite the two battalion-sized actions, Operation Wheeler/Wallowa mostly involved numerous contacts between American and NVA/VC small-unit patrols.¹³

The war in the 1st Marine Division Da Nang area of operations, especially after the repulse of the 2d NVA Division's offensive in the second week of February, also reverted to a small-unit war. For the Marine units in the TAOR it was a period of retrenchment and readjustment. By the end of the month, the newly arrived 27th Marines took over the sectors formerly held by the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Bacher, the commander of the 2d Battalion, 27th Marines, remembered that when he arrived he was met by a

A Marine combat engineer carefully disarms a booby-trapped 105mm artillery round south of Da Nang.

Abel Collection





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A708081

Mines and explosive devices were among the greatest dangers to Marines at Da Nang. Two members of Company C, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines administer to a fallen comrade who had just tripped a "surprise explosive device."

lieutenant colonel from III MAF who took him to headquarters, "where I was given orders to report to the 1st Marine Division." At the same time, "troops and equipment of 2/27 were being trucked southwest of Da Nang to the CP [command post] of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines." After about three or four days, the 3d Battalion departed for Phu Bai and "2/27 assumed the mission and TAOR" of the latter battalion. The 3d Battalion, 27th Marines relieved the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines which also left for Phu Bai. Lieutenant Colonel Woodham, the 3d Battalion commander, recalled that his unit's main responsibility was the patrolling of the Rocket Belt.¹⁴

The 7th Marines and the Korean Marine Brigade remained responsible for the southern and western area of operations, including An Hoa. At An Hoa, Colonel Ross R. Miner, the 7th Marines commander, later remarked that his 3d Battalion there was "barely keeping its head above water." The enemy had closed the

land lines of communication and resupply could be carried out only by air.¹⁵

Indicative of the demoralizing characteristic of the 1st Division war in the Da Nang TAOR, nearly 54 percent of all division casualties in February were as a result of mines and explosive devices. Lieutenant Colonel Woodham later observed his area of operations contained "the highest saturation of mines and booby traps in the history of land warfare."^{16*}

*It must be remembered that the percentage figure above relates to all 1st Marine Division casualties, not only those at Da Nang. For February 1968, the 1st Marine Division suffered a total of 369 KIA and 2,400 wounded. Of that total, 142 of the dead and 1,100 of the wounded were sustained by TF X-Ray in the battle for Hue City. Mine warfare and explosive devices played only a small role in that battle. It would be safe to assume then that the percentage of 1st Marine Division casualties at Da Nang as a result of enemy mines would be even higher than the 54 percent quoted above. 1st MarDiv ComdC, Feb68, p. 7. See also Chapter 12.

With the securing of Hue in late February, Task Force X-Ray at Phu Bai prepared to take the offensive to open Route 1 between Da Nang and Phu Bai, which had been closed since Tet. On 26 February, Colonel Robert D. Bohn's 5th Marines began Operation Houston in the Phu Loc and Hai Van Pass sectors. To carry out the operation, Bohn received the two battalions from Da Nang relieved by the 27th Marines, his 3d Battalion and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines.* In addition, Brigadier General LaHue, the Task Force X-Ray commander, provided the 5th Marines with operational control over three U.S. Army battalions, the 1st and 3d Battalions, 327th Infantry and the 2d Battalion, 502d Infantry.¹⁷

While the infantry provided security in Operation Houston, Seabees, Marine engineers, and the U.S. Army 35th Engineer Battalion worked on the repairs of Route 1 and its bridges and culverts. According to Marine reports, the VC and NVA during the Tet offensive had damaged or destroyed 20 bridges and 26 culverts along Route 1, largely between Hai Van Pass and Phu Bai. Oddly enough, the enemy pioneers and demolition teams caused relatively little damage in the Hai Van Pass itself, where Route 1 was most vulnerable. On 29 February, the engineers completed the repair work on the final section of Route 1 between Hai Van Pass and Phu Loc. Technically Route 1 was now open throughout the entire length of I Corps. III MAF, nevertheless, postponed the first road convoy from Da Nang to Phu Bai until March.¹⁸

With the end of Operation Hue City in sight, General LaHue planned to use the 1st Marines to operate along the area northeast of Phu Bai in order to secure the water route of communication from the mouth of the Perfume River to Hue City. Although the NVA and Viet Cong during the battle for the city, occasionally harassed river traffic along the Perfume River, they never succeeded in cutting this vital logistic lifeline for the allied forces in the city and at Phu Bai. On 12 February, Task Force X-Ray had taken over from the 3d Marine Division the responsibility for the protection of the Naval Support Activity at the Col Co/Tan My LST ramp at the mouth of the Perfume River. From the LST ramp, supplies were either transhipped by truck to Phu Bai or loaded on board LCUs and smaller river craft for delivery at the LCU Ramp in Hue City. During the month of February, enemy

gunners struck 44 of the smaller naval craft and destroyed two LCUs.¹⁹

With the closing of Route 1 during much of February and the continuing arrival of Army units in Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces, resupply by sea became even more critical. One Marine staff officer later remembered that when the 1st Air Cavalry and the 101st Airborne units first deployed north, "it was touch and go." Fortunately, the Army's 1st Logistical Command together with III MAF and a Navy pontoon causeway unit had already made preparations for the development of a logistic over-the-shore facility along the coast running parallel to Hai Lang in southern Quang Tri Province. Army logistic planners estimated that the Army forces would require, "3,600 tons of supplies daily in an area where existing supply lines were just barely able to keep up with requirements." While work began in February, the new logistical facility, called Wunder Beach, did not become fully operational until mid-March.²⁰

During February, the 1st Air Cavalry Division continued Operation Jeb Stuart in northern Thua Thien and southern Quang Tri Provinces. While operating to some extent in enemy *Base Areas 114* and *101*, the division confined most of its activity to the battle for Hue City, the establishment of Camp Evans, and the buildup of its forces near Quang Tri City at Hai Lang.** Indicative of the growing influence of the Army in this sector, the 1st Air Cavalry took over more of the 3d Marine Division area of operations. On 16 February, the Cavalry's 1st Brigade assumed operational control of the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines and responsibility for the 3d Marines' former Osceola II tactical area near Quang Tri. While the 3d Marines, with only rear echelon troops attached to it, still remained accountable for the interior defense of the new Quang Tri base and airfield, the Army's 1st Brigade now provided the protection to the approaches for both the Marine base and the new Army bases at Hai Lang and Wunder Beach.²¹

**During the month, the 1st Air Cavalry consisted of its 1st Brigade at Hai Lang; the 2d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division at Camp Evans; and its 3d Brigade taking part in the battle for Hue, although still nominally part of Operation Jeb Stuart. The division's participation in the battle for Hue, which was included in its overall statistics for Jeb Stuart, accounted for nearly half of the 1st Cavalry's 1,167 casualties for the month as well the reportedly 2,000 losses it inflicted on the enemy for the month. The 1st Air Cavalry's 2d Brigade was slated to relieve the 101st Airborne's 2d Brigade at Camp Evans in March. III MAF ComdC, Feb68; Waldron and Beavers, "The Critical Year, 1968," pp. 19-20. See also Chapter 12.

*The other two battalions of the 5th Marines, the 1st and 2d Battalions, were attached to the 1st Marines in Operation Hue City. See Chapter 12.



Photo is from the Abel Collection

A Navy LCU (landing craft, utility) arrives at the Dong Ha LCU ramp laden with drums of asphalt. Although the NVA made some attempts to close the Cua Viet, the Navy had established Task Force Clearwater to convoy river traffic from the coast to Dong Ha.

Another reason for the relief of the 3d Marines at Quang Tri was to free the regiment to assume control over the ground operations to safeguard the vital Cua Viet water passageway to Dong Ha. With the interdiction of much of Route 1 during and after Tet, the lifeline of the Marine forces in the north depended more and more upon the sea and to a somewhat lesser extent upon air resupply. During February, III MAF sent by ship from Da Nang to Dong Ha over 45,700 short tons of material as compared to 342 tons arriving at Dong Ha by air. With the disruption of the land lines of communication and the occasional enemy interdiction of the Cua Viet, the 3d Marine Division reported that the "division's [supply] requirement fell short." The division especially lacked communications equipment and repair parts. In order to meet the division's needs, III MAF limited shipment to those supplies considered

"combat essential."* With the approval of MACV, General Cushman also curtailed the shipment of "Dye-marker" material and halted all construction work on the barrier. Still Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins, the 3d Marine Division commander, recalled that in mid-February at a very critical juncture, the division received for three days large "shipments of cement and culverts from Da Nang." According to Tompkins, he sent an angry message to III MAF to "delay the culverts and cement in favor of food and ammunition."²²

* Lieutenant Colonel Otto Lehrack, who as a captain commanded Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, commented that during this period resupply was difficult for the Marines of his battalion: "We took helmets, flak jackets and boots off our dead. I knew a Marine in Graves Registration who was my only reliable source for compasses." LtCol Otto Lehrack, Comments on draft, dtd 19Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Lehrack Comments.

Despite certain “snafus” such as the unwanted cement, the American command quickly took steps to ensure the logistic support to its forces in the north. In the Cua Viet sector, on 24 February, the Navy established Task Force Clearwater under III MAF to coordinate river traffic and convoys of Navy craft from the Cua Viet facility to Dong Ha.* During the month, enemy gunners killed 7 sailors, wounded 47 more, and damaged 27 Navy vessels. On 27 February, for example, an enemy B-40 rocket-propelled grenade struck an LCU on the Cua Viet laden with explosives resulting in the disabling of both the LCU and an escort patrol boat. Most of the convoyed vessels, however, completed the trip without incident.²³

The 3d Marine Division also took measures to safeguard the Cua Viet and attempt to keep North Vietnamese regulars and VC main force units out of the northeastern quadrant of Quang Tri Province above the Cua Viet. On 29 February, Major General Tompkins combined the two operations in the sector, Operation Napoleon and Operation Saline into one operation, Operation Napoleon/Saline under the control of the 3d Marines. Colonel Milton A. Hull, who had assumed command of the 3d Marines on 18 February from Colonel Joseph E. Lo Prete, moved his command post on the 29th, from the Quang Tri airfield to the Cua Viet facility and collocated it with the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion.²⁴

While Lieutenant Colonel Edward R. Toner, the commander of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, during February nominally had operational control of both Operations Napoleon and Saline, his concerns were mainly with the activities of his own battalion. In February, during Operation Napoleon, the amphibian tractor battalion, with one attached rifle company, limited itself to patrols generally around the Cua Viet Naval Facility at the mouth of the river. While ground contact remained light, the enemy subjected the base to heavy incoming rocket and artillery fire and continued efforts to interdict

the river with uneven results. For the month in Operation Napoleon, the Marines sustained casualties of 4 dead and 30 wounded while accounting for 79 of the enemy.²⁵

The SLF Bravo battalion, BLT 3/1, under Lieutenant Colonel Max McQuown, in Operation Saline, operating for the most part above, but occasionally below, the Cua Viet, on the other hand, continued to encounter elements of the *803d NVA Regiment*.** In February, the battalion killed over 270 of the enemy, took 18 prisoners, and recovered 72 individual and 35 crew-served enemy weapons. According to both Marine and ARVN sources, since 29 January, the allies had killed 1,000 enemy troops in the Cua Viet region and had prevented an attack on Dong Ha.²⁶

While the watch on the Cua Viet remained somewhat tenuous, the enemy forces continued to mount pressure on Khe Sanh and still posed a threat to the Marine positions south of the DMZ in Operations Kentucky and Lancaster II.*** As one 3d Marine Division staff officer remarked, the NVA in the border region, “always had someone pressing us somewhere.” In the 4th Marines Operation Lancaster II, after an ambush of a convoy near Camp Carroll on Route 9 in early February and a company engagement near Ca Lu, the North Vietnamese forces largely limited themselves to artillery and mortar bombardments of Marine positions. On 28 February, a NVA antiaircraft gun shot down a Marine CH-46 not far from Ca Lu resulting in the death of 22 Marines. For the month

*Task Force Clearwater consisted of 20 river patrol boats (PBRs), reinforced with monitors, armored river craft, PACVs (Patrol Air Cushioned Vehicles), landing craft, and minesweepers. The Task Force was responsible not only for the Cua Viet, but also the Perfume River further south which provided access to the sea for the city of Hue. It maintained its headquarters at Mobile Base II, a floating barge complex, located first at Tan My and then moved north to the Cua Viet. Edward J. Marolda, *By Sea, Air, and Land, An Illustrated History of the U.S. Navy and the War in Southeast Asia* (Washington: Naval Historical Center, 1994), p. 188. See also Chapter 28.

**See Chapter 7 for description of the BLT's activities during late January and early February in Operation Badger Catch/Saline. In the final stages of the battle of Hue, the South Vietnamese Marines captured North Vietnamese troops from the *803d NVA Regiment*. See Chapter 12. Colonel Max McQuown, the then BLT commander, later recalled two significant operations south of the Cua Viet. In the first case, the BLT attached reconnaissance platoon, operating south of the river, sighted NVA formations. Employing LVTs and LCUs to cross the river, the rest of the battalion supported by tanks surrounded the NVA in a village. With the tanks lighting up the area with their Xenon lights and after an artillery and mortar bombardment, McQuown launched a night attack and secured the hamlet. While the battalion remained south of the river, the reconnaissance platoon spotted another group of NVA in a neighboring village and the battalion secured this hamlet as well. Before the BLT returned to its base area north of the river, the Marines searched another village and collected a large number of young males in civilian clothes. Suspecting they were North Vietnamese, the Marines turned them over to the South Vietnamese. Col Max McQuown, Comments on draft, dtd 22Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter McQuown Comments.

***See Chapter 14 for description of operations at Khe Sanh and Chapter 7 for Operations Kentucky and Lancaster II in early February.



Top is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801311 and bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A650034
Top, Marines from BLT 2/4 taking part in Operation Lancaster II exchange fire under smoke cover across an open field with North Vietnamese troops about 2,000 meters north of Camp Carroll. Below, Marines from the same battalion and operation rush across open ground with two of the troops carrying 3.5-inch rockets.



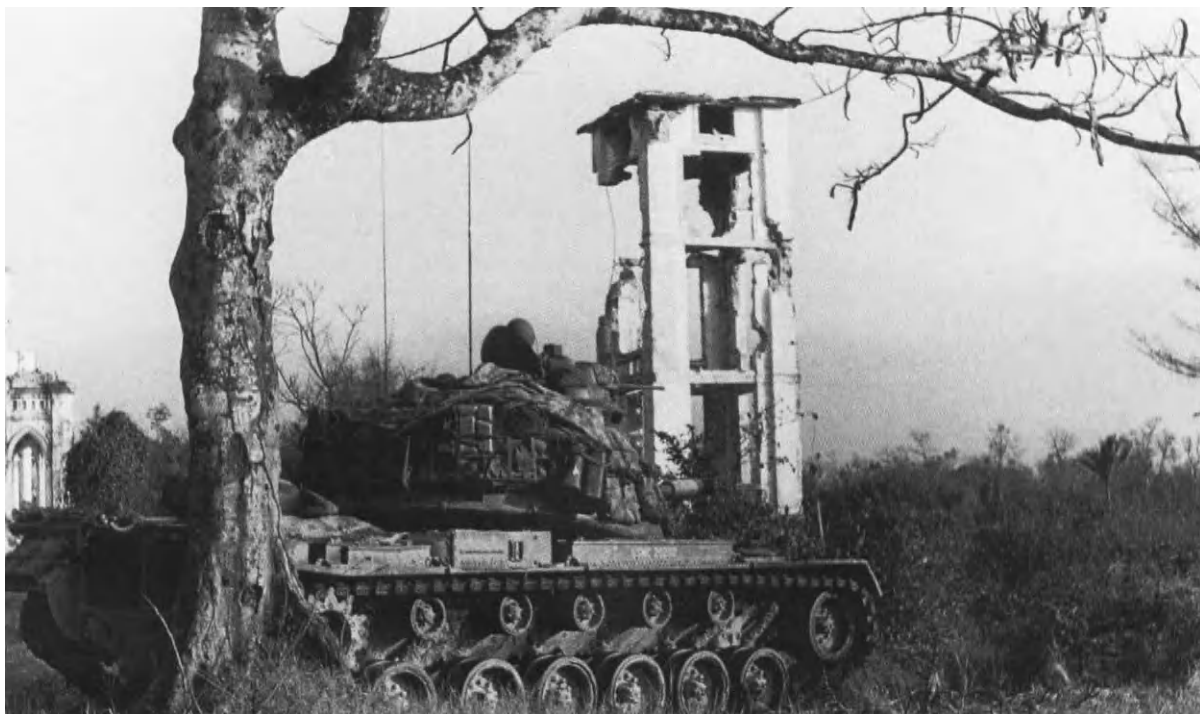


Photo is from the Abel Collection

A Marine M48 tank from the 3d Tank Battalion rumbles past a battle-damaged church just east of Con Thien. Marines from Con Thien outpost had spotted three North Vietnamese tanks north of their position in North Vietnam.

in Operation Lancaster II, the Marines reported killing 85 of the enemy and sustained casualties of 58 dead and 321 wounded.²⁷

In the 9th Marines sector in the Kentucky area of operations, the Marines confirmed the presence of the 320th NVA Division which had replaced the 324B Division in the DMZ war. The North Vietnamese maintained a screening force south of the DMZ and the Marine outpost at Con Thien, on 16 February, observed three North Vietnamese tanks north of their position and called in air. According to Marine reports, the North Vietnamese had two armored regiments, the 202d and 203d NVA, each with 80 tanks (40 T-34s and 40 PT76s). Although not knowing the location of the two armored regiments, American intelligence acknowledged the capability of the enemy to use tanks in areas where he could secretly mass his forces "and overrun friendly outposts with little opposition." The Marines prepared anti-mechanized plans.²⁸

For the most part, the ground action in Kentucky slackened after the first two weeks of February. In one of the sharpest encounters, however, on 16 February, a 3d Battalion, 3d Marines two-company sweep of the

southern DMZ encountered NVA infantrymen in bunkers, but no tanks. With the assistance of air, the Marines killed approximately 20 of the enemy at the cost of 4 Marine dead and 6 wounded.* While the enemy mounted no major offensive against Marine positions in Kentucky during the latter part of the month, the NVA continued to deploy forces in and through the DMZ.²⁹

As in the Lancaster area of operations, the enemy intensified his artillery, rocket, and mortar shelling of Marine positions and base areas in the Kentucky area. In one of the more spectacular instances, on 26 February, the North Vietnamese gunners fired some 400 artillery and mortar rounds and scored direct hits on the Dong Ha airfield and the Force Logistic Support Group Bravo complex located there. While casualties were relatively low, one dead and several wounded, material damage was heavy. The shelling destroyed two light Army observation aircraft, an

*Lieutenant Colonel Otto Lehrack observed that his Company I was the only one of the two companies involved that had contact in this particular action. He remembered that the contact took place in the northern sector of a prime enemy infiltration route. Lehrack Comments.



Photo is from the 3d MarDiv ComdC, Feb68

An officers' quarters in the 3d Marine Division command post sector at Dong Ha has been completely demolished by a direct hit from a North Vietnamese 122mm rocket.

ammunition storage dump, and 20,000 gallons of diesel fuel. In Kentucky during the month, the Marines sustained casualties of 89 dead and 267 wounded. During the same period, they reported killing nearly 400 of the enemy and capturing 39 prisoners.

While the bombardment of the Dong Ha base exposed its vulnerability to enemy weaponry, some relief of the logistic situation for the allied forces in the north was in sight. The new Quang Tri base, which was for the most part out of enemy artillery range except for mortars and the occasional rocket, was about half completed and could begin to share part of the logistic burden. By the end of the month, the remaining 3d Marine Division rear echelon forces still at Phu Bai prepared to shift their operations to Quang Tri. At the same time, FLSG Bravo at Dong Ha moved some of its equipment and ammunition still in exposed storage sites to the Quang Tri base. The new Wunder Beach facility also was nearing completion. While the North Vietnamese forced the allies to convoy naval craft along both the Cua Viet

and Perfume Rivers, the supplies were getting through. As the III MAF commander, Lieutenant General Cushman, five months later explained, "with the increased forces in Northern I Corps and logistic support problems . . . , we had to move cautiously until our logistics pipeline was capable of supporting a bold and aggressive campaign throughout ICTZ."³⁰

Readjustments in the U.S. I Corps Command Structure

With the arrival of Army forces in northern I Corps, MACV and III MAF continued to readjust the command structure in the north. From the beginning of the year, General Westmoreland had his doubts about the capability of the III MAF and Marine division staffs to control the expanding war in the north.* In early January, he convinced the new Marine Corps Commandant, General Leonard F. Chapman, who was on a visit to Vietnam, that both the 1st and 3d Marine

*See chapter 1 for the discussion of Westmoreland's doubts about the Marine Corps command structure.

Divisions required an additional brigadier general assistant division commander. According to the MACV commander, the "wide dispersion" of division units dictated that the Marine Corps adopt the Army practice of two assistant division commanders "for most effective command and control." General Chapman concurred as did Admiral Sharp, the Pacific theater commander. By mid-January, the Defense Department authorized each of the Marine divisions two assistant division commanders.³¹

With the new authorization, General Chapman immediately set out to fill the new billets. On 19 January, he informed both MACV and Lieutenant General Krulak, the FMFPac commander, that he had ordered Brigadier General Jacob Glick, the former commander of the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade

Right, BGen Jacob E. Glick, here in an official portrait, relieved BGen Louis Metzger, who was about to be promoted to major general, as Assistant Division Commander of the 3d Marine Division. Below, from left, MajGen Rathvon McC. Tompkins, the 3d Division commander; Gen Leonard F. Chapman, Commandant of the Marine Corps; MajGen Metzger; and LtGen Robert E. Cushman, CG, III MAF, hold the two-star flag of newly promoted MajGen Metzger.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A419340

3d MarDiv ComdC, Jan68



on Okinawa, to Vietnam as the second assistant division commander (ADC) for the 3d Marine Division. Chapman was "searching for another brig gen for 1st MarDiv and will send him earliest."³²

Actually Brigadier General Glick relieved Brigadier General Louis Metzger, whose tour of duty was about to end. Metzger had controlled the 3d Marine Division (Fwd) headquarters at Dong Ha until Major General Tompkins had moved his command post there from Phu Bai.* Tompkins wanted Glick back at the division rear at Phu Bai to supervise the transfer from Phu Bai to the new 3d Division rear base at Quang Tri. The enemy's Tet offensive, however, delayed the move and through February General Glick shared space with Brigadier General Foster C. LaHue's 1st Marine Division Task Force X-Ray headquarters at Phu Bai. According to Glick, he looked after the logistic support forces there while LaHue controlled operations.³³

Brigadier General Carl W. Hoffman, who arrived in Vietnam a few days after Glick, in fact, became the second assistant division commander of the 3d Marine Division. With the greater emphasis upon the 3d Division area of operations which included the DMZ and Khe Sanh, General Cushman delayed until February appointing a second assistant division commander to the 1st Marine Division. Indeed, when General Hoffman, who had just served as Military Secretary to the Marine Corps Commandant, landed at the Da Nang Air Base, Cushman first thought to place him temporarily in a special III MAF billet. According to the III MAF commander, he considered establishing a "III MAF War Room (Fwd) at Dong Ha" and making Hoffman his personal representative to the 3d Marine Division. General Westmoreland's decision to create the new MACV (Forward) headquarters** at Phu Bai under his deputy, General Abrams, made the idea of a forward III MAF headquarters superfluous. Brigadier General Hoffman joined General Tompkins at Dong Ha as the 3d Marine Division ADC for operations.³⁴

By this time, it was clear that III MAF was to become truly a joint command rather than basically a Marine Corps headquarters. As General Hoffman several years later remembered, "at that time we realized that the United States Army was moving to the north in earnest." In mid-January, General West-



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A414846
BGen Carl W. Hoffman became the Assistant Division Commander (ADC) of the 3d Marine Division for operations. The 3d Marine Division now had two ADCs.

moreland assigned Army Brigadier General Salve H. Matheson, the former commander of the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, to Lieutenant General Cushman's staff as Deputy Commander, Army. In a reclama, the III MAF commander asked Westmoreland for permission to change Matheson's designation to "Deputy for Army Matters." As General Cushman explained, Marine Major General Raymond L. Murray was already Deputy Commander for all U.S. forces in III MAF. Cushman wanted to use Matheson as a "point of contact for major Army commanders" and as an advisor to the III MAF command as to "Army capabilities in both the operational and logistical fields." Westmoreland agreed to the change, but stated that in the meantime that Matheson would temporarily be made the J-3 or operations officer for the new MACV (Forward) headquarters at Phu Bai.³⁵

From the Marine perspective, the activation of the MACV (Forward) headquarters at Phu Bai did nothing to ease the command relationships in the north. If anything, it added to the problem by laying an inter-

* See Chapter 3 for the move of the 3d Marine Division headquarters north to Dong Ha in January.

** See Chapter 11 for the establishment of MACV (Fwd) at Phu Bai.



Photo courtesy of U.S. Army Center of Military History
In February 1968, MACV established a forward headquarters at Phu Bai under U.S. Army Gen Creighton W. Abrams, Deputy ComUSMACV, which caused some resentment among Marine officers.

posing headquarters between III MAF and MACV and providing an additional layer of command from above. According to General Cushman, "when Abrams came north, oh Christ, we got messages all night long, in the middle of the Goddamned night and everything else."* Colonel Franklin L. Smith, a member of the III MAF G-3 staff, recalled: "They [the MACV (Forward) Headquarters staff] were located up there and forgot that they were a senior headquarters to III MAF on one hand [by not keeping III MAF informed on its actions] and remembered very well on every other hand because they began to inter-

*General Earl E. Anderson, who served as the III MAF Chief of Staff, remembered: "More than once I had to go to General Cushman's quarters to awaken (not an easy task as he was a very sound sleeper and had a hearing loss suffered at Pearl Harbor when he was aboard the *Pennsylvania*) and ask him to come to the command center to take a call from Abrams on the scrambler phone, which he hated to use. While General Cushman respected Abrams as a combat officer, Abrams was very opinionated and often abrasive." Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

pose themselves between III MAF" and subordinate units. Cushman concluded, "as would be expected, having the senior commander's agent in the battle area resulted in his exercise of more command influence and direction of III MAF Forces . . . than is customarily exercised by the senior command."³⁶

The creation of the MACV (Forward) headquarters also caused resentment among Cushman's subordinate Marine commanders, if not Cushman himself. Major General Murray, the III MAF Deputy Commander, later stated that he assumed that MACV established the forward headquarters because it did not trust III MAF to control the situation. The 3d Marine Division commander General Tompkins was even more blunt: "I thought it was the most unpardonable thing that Saigon did." Despite the disclaimers on the part of MACV that it had still utmost trust and confidence in Cushman, Tompkins declared, "you don't move a MACV (Forward) up in a combat area unless you're very, very, very worried about the local commander, afraid he can't hack it. . . . it's tantamount to . . . a relief of a commander."³⁷

On 14–15 February, the sudden relief of Major General Murray because of illness by Marine Major General William J. Van Ryzin, who arrived from Washington, only compounded the confusion. Rumors circulated in Saigon about a shakeup in the Marine command, which was not the case. On the 14th, Murray informed General Cushman of his incapacity and turned himself into the hospital. Van Ryzin received the news on the morning of the 14th and was on an aircraft for Vietnam by 0600 the following day.³⁸

By mid-February there was an obvious need to clarify the command relations in northern I Corps. On 17 February, at a meeting at Phu Bai with Generals Abrams and Cushman, Westmoreland announced that he planned to form a provisional corps (which would formally be called Provisional Corps) in northern I Corps sometime in early March that would consist of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, the 101st Airborne Division, and the 3d Marine Division. The MACV (Forward) headquarters would then be deactivated and the new Provisional Corps would be subordinate to III MAF. General Westmoreland stated that he hoped to appoint U.S. Army Lieutenant General William B. Rosson to head the new command. Rosson, the previous spring, had commanded the U.S. Army's Task Force Oregon which later became the Americal Division at Chu Lai. Having enjoyed excellent personal relations with III

MAF, Rosson was an ideal selection.* To further allay Marine suspicions about the proposed command relations, the MACV commander told Cushman that he might ask the Marine Corps to provide a major general as deputy commander for the new Provisional Corps (Prov Corps). While the 3d Marine Division would still receive close air support from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, the whole question about air control still remained unresolved.³⁹

For the time being, however, III MAF and MACV concentrated on working out the wrinkles for the establishment of the Provisional Corps. On 20 February, General Abrams sent out to the various interested parties a proposed letter of instruction (LOI) for the new command. According to Abrams' proposal, the commander of the new corps would have operational control of all units in the northern two provinces of I Corps with the exception of the Hai Van Pass area of Thua Thien Province. The corps would be similar in organization to the U.S. Field Forces I and II, with the exception that it would operate under the Commanding General, III MAF, General Cushman. Cushman would still remain the Senior Advisor in I Corps and maintain his relationship with the CORDS organization. III MAF would not have operational control of Seventh Air Force units in I Corps. The U.S. Army, Vietnam would provide a headquarters to coordinate logistic support in the two northern provinces. Furthermore, the Prov Corps commander would have the authority to have direct liaison with General Lam, the I Corps commander and with the ARVN forces in his sector.⁴⁰

In their comments on the proposed directive, General Cushman and Rear Admiral Kenneth L. Veth, Commander, Naval Forces, Vietnam took exception to or wanted further elaboration on some of the provisions. Admiral Veth desired assurances that he remain in the operational chain of command over the naval forces in I Corps including the Naval Support Activity, Da Nang and the Seabees. He also assumed that the Navy would retain the responsibility for common items of supply for all U.S. forces in I Corps. General Cushman suggested that the tactical situation determine the boundary between the 1st Marine Division



U.S. Army Center of Military History, *Top, U.S. Army LtGen William B. Rosson, Provisional (Prov) Corps Commander, is seen with South Vietnamese Col Quang Toan, the commander of the 2d ARVN Division. Below, Marine MajGen Raymond G. Davis, a holder of the Medal of Honor, was made Deputy Commander, Prov Corps. The new command replaced MACV (Fwd) and was a subordinate command of III MAF, which helped to smooth relations between the Marines and MACV.*

U.S. Marine Corps



*At the time, Lieutenant General Rosson was then Commanding General I Field Force Vietnam. According to General Westmoreland, Rosson would retain his position as commander of the I Field Force, so as to retain his third star while serving in a subordinate position. His deputy would become acting commander of the I Field Force command. Westmoreland msg to Abrams, dtd 26Feb68 (EO Files, Abrams Papers, CMH.)

and Provisional Corps. He also opposed any proposal to place Task Force X-Ray under Prov Corps or any change in operational control or coordination in relation to other U.S. or South Vietnamese forces in I Corps. The III MAF commander also asked that there be no diminishment in his authority over the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing to support both the 1st and 3d Marine Divisions. Relative to the logistic setup, Cushman recommended that the III MAF FLC and the Army Logistic Command at Qui Nhon support their respective Services and that they work out an agreement on mutual support.⁴¹

The proposed letter of instruction for Provisional Corps continued to be refined. On 27 February, General Abrams sent a revised draft to General Westmoreland that incorporated some of the wishes of the Marines. The new draft still called for the establishment of an Army logistic headquarters in I Corps and left unresolved the boundary between the 1st Marine Division and Provisional Corps. It also failed to mention the command relationship between Task Force X-Ray and Provisional Corps. In a message to General Westmoreland, General Cushman asked for a clearer demarcation of his authority. He wanted the letter of instruction to state specifically that Prov Corps would exercise operational control "of only ground tactical units" and that III MAF would retain control of all wing assets in I Corps. Again Cushman argued strongly that the 1st Division retain operational control of Task Force X-Ray and that its area of operations include the Phu Loc District as well as the Hai Van Pass sector of Thua Thien Province.⁴²

On 3 March 1968, General Westmoreland finally issued the letter of instruction for Provisional (Prov) Corps. The final approved version designated Lieutenant General Rosson as the commanding general and 10 March as the effective date for the formal establishment of the new command. Marine Major General Raymond G. Davis became the deputy commander under General Rosson. General Westmoreland also incorporated into the directive most of the changes recommended by General Cushman. Still, Westmoreland's final directive clearly indicated that there was a special relationship between Prov Corps and MACV. Although General Cushman was to be his immediate superior, General Rosson was to submit reports "simultaneously" to MACV and III MAF "to insure timely reporting." On the cover sheet of the III MAF copy of the LOI, a III MAF staff officer wrote, "I wonder why they don't want 1st Div and Americal Division reports direct?" General Cushman initialed the routing slip

without comment. He had already lost one major battle. On 7 March, General Westmoreland ordered, "all Marine fixed-wing strike and reconnaissance aircraft, and their associated Marine air control assets, be assigned effective 10 March 1968, to the mission direction of Deputy for Air Operations, the Commanding General, Seventh Air Force."^{43*}

While assured, at least temporarily, of the primacy of his authority in northern I Corps, at least over all ground forces, and despite denials to the contrary, General Cushman and his staff still harbored suspicions about the Army's, if not Westmoreland's, motivations.^{**} As Brigadier General Hoffman later declared, "it became necessary, or it became desirable, from our viewpoint to be sure that the Army didn't take over everything that we'd built up in that particular area." Colonel Franklin Smith of the III MAF staff remembered that the transition of MACV (Forward) into Provisional Corps was rather painful. The PCV staff was largely composed of the same personnel that made up the forward headquarters and "they tended to carry over the authority they had as MACV Forward people." According to Smith, "we would have from time to time to pick up the phone and say you can't do this." Aware that the PCV G-3 was to be a brigadier general, Cushman assigned Brigadier General Hoffman temporarily to be the III MAF G-3.^{***} As General Cushman concluded, III MAF was a Marine command only in relation to Marine peculiar things, "but for tactical operations it's a joint command."⁴⁴

* See Chapters 23 and 24 for discussion of the Single Manager issue relative to Marine aviation.

** In his interviews, Cushman supported both the creation of MACV (Fwd) headquarters and the establishment of Provisional Corps. At the same time, however, his remarks indicated a suspicion that the Army was attempting to move into northern I Corps and that he took measures to guard against this. See Cushman Mar69 intvw, pp. 459-60 and 465-66 and Cushman Presentation, tab F, pp. 18-9. Army historian Graham A. Cosmas observed: "It seems clear that Westmoreland expected a much bigger Communist offensive in the north than actually developed. He did not trust III MAF to handle it and wanted Abrams on the scene with a headquarters to control the battle if necessary. Westmoreland authorized Abrams at MACV Fwd to give tactical direction to III MAF's subordinate units if the situation required. ProvCorps did ease III MAF's span of control problems, but its presence raised Marine suspicions, although Rosson evidently did a good job of smoothing out relations with III MAF." Dr. Graham A. Cosmas, CMH, Comments on draft, dtd 23Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

*** Hoffman nominally continued to be 3d Marine Division assistant division commander, but was carried on the 3d Marine Division rolls as TAD (temporary additional duty) at III MAF. 3d MarDiv and III MAF ComdCs, Feb-Apr68.

Planning for the Future

With the new command structure in I Corps largely in place at the beginning of March, the allies began to plan the counteroffensive. As General Cushman later explained, the idea was to go "after the enemy first in the coastal areas in a series of short duration operations, using the mobility of our forces to fix and destroy enemy forces which had escaped from the major Tet battle areas." On 2 March, at a meeting at III MAF headquarters in Da Nang, Generals Cushman and Abrams approved the planning concept for the final phase of the offensive, Operation Pegasus, the relief and breakout from Khe Sanh.⁴⁵

On 10 March, with the formal establishment of Prov Corps, Lieutenant General Rosson* at his headquarters in Phu Bai outlined for both Generals Westmoreland and Cushman his full plans for the counteroffensive in the north. The first effort would be the continuing operations against enemy forces in the Con Thien-Gio Linh forces north of Dong Ha. At the end of March and the beginning of April, the 1st Air Cavalry Division and the 3d Marine Division would give priority to the opening of Route 9 and beginning Operation Pegasus for the relief of Khe Sanh.** Following the relief of Khe Sanh, Prov Corps would then undertake a reconnaissance-in-force into the A Shau Valley southwest of Hue.⁴⁶

At the 10 March meeting, General Westmoreland approved Rosson's concept and also directed General Cushman to undertake a broad-based study to estimate the future requirements for the defense of northern I Corps. General Cushman turned the task over to his acting G-3, Brigadier General Hoffman with a due date of 1 April. For planning purposes, Hoffman's study group was to assume that the political aspects of the war would not change and that there would be no further refinement of the rules of engagement. The planners were to assume that by 1 September Khe Sanh was no longer in danger and that Route 9 would be open from Khe Sanh to Dong Ha. By that date, one of

the Army divisions, either the 1st Air Cavalry or the 101st Airborne, would have been detached from I Corps. Also included in the scenario for the study were the assumptions that the enemy would not have made any major reinforcement of his forces in the north and that the situation elsewhere in I Corps would not have required any depletion of the remaining units in the northern two provinces. According to MACV's guidelines, Hoffman's group was to look especially at "the pertinent aspects of the dyemarker system" relative to Khe Sanh and the DMZ strongpoints. Westmoreland directed that the analysis be "'wide open' and not constrained by past policies or precedents."⁴⁷

Hoffman's group completed its study within the designated time and made several proposals relative to the war in the north. Given their guidelines, the III MAF planners concentrated on the future of the barrier, the strongpoints and allied forces along the DMZ, and the base at Khe Sanh. As far as the A Shau Valley, the group recommended only the establishing of a fire base in the approaches to the valley, and limiting operations to artillery and infantry raids. In probably one of its more controversial conclusions, the panel suggested the abandonment of Khe Sanh in favor of a much smaller base at Ca Lu. The group argued that the defense of Khe Sanh would require a force of at least 10 battalions. Relative to the barrier, the Hoffman panel observed that the enemy threat in the DMZ sector was "*invasion*, as opposed to infiltration." The study group contended that the barrier strongpoints actually assisted the enemy by placing Marine and allied forces in fixed and static positions within NVA artillery range. Still the III MAF study advised against cancellation of Dyemarker because a "major conceptual change at this time might not be politically or psychologically acceptable." Instead, the III MAF panel suggested an "indefinite *deferral* of further Dyemarker SPOS [strong point obstacle system] while maintaining current positions with a reduced number of forces." While most of its recommendations were not immediately implemented, the III MAF study clearly outlined the future prospects facing the allied forces in the northern war.

March Operations in the DMZ Sector

While the American command planned to take the initiative from the enemy, the North Vietnamese still maintained formidable forces in the field, especially in the eastern DMZ sector in Operations Kentucky and Napoleon/Saline. In the Cua Viet region, in early March, this became increasingly evident. In Operation

* Although General Rosson did not assume command of Prov Corps until 10 March, since 1 March he had been the Deputy Commander, MACV (Forward). Waldron and Beavers, "The Critical Year, 1968," p. 19.

** According to General Rosson, he first wanted to mount a major offensive in the center and eastern portion of the 3d Marine Division and then sometime later follow with the Pegasus operation. He wrote that both Generals Cushman and Westmoreland overruled him "in turn based on what I was told was President Johnson's insistence that Khe Sanh be relieved soonest." Gen William B. Rosson, USA, Comments on draft, dtd 27Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File). See also Chapter 14 for the Pegasus planning.

Napoleon/Saline, on 1 March, Company M, BLT 3/1, supported by two engineer LVTE-1s and two howitzer LVTH-6s from the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion, crossed Jones Creek just above where it emptied into the Cua Viet for a sweep into the hamlet of Mai Xa Thi (West).^{48*}

Earlier, the LVTEs and LVTHs "swam down the Cua Viet to a position a few meters south of the village and west of Jones Creek. From there, the LVTEs shot line charges over the houses fronting the river, levelling the structures and "clearing the way for the follow on Marines." The LVTHs fired canister rounds into the village and then moved to new positions off shore to support the infantry. While still on the LVTs carrying them across the river, the Marine company came under accurate fire from the western bank of Jones Creek.** Lieutenant Colonel Max McQuown, the BLT commander, immediately ordered his Company I to secure the left flank of Company M and the southern portion of Mai Xa Thi. In heavy fighting that lasted until nightfall, the two companies killed 36 of the enemy and took 3 prisoners. During the next two days, BLT 3/1 operated in the village and secured a small island, just below Mai Xa Thi, in the Cua Viet River. The battalion uncovered 83 more bodies and captured another prisoner. Marine casualties were also heavy—27 killed and 81 wounded.

In this renewed fighting for Mai Xa Thi, the Marines learned that elements of the 320th NVA Division were coming into the Cua Viet sector to replace the 803d NVA Regiment which had the previous month moved south into Thua Thien Province. While most of the enemy dead were from the 270th Main Force Regiment, which had long operated in the region, two of the prisoners, a lieutenant and a private, were from the 52d NVA Regiment, 320th NVA Division. Up to this time, the 52d had been in reserve above the DMZ in North Vietnam, while the other two regiments of the division, the 48th and 64th had moved into the Kentucky and Lancaster areas.^{49***}

* This was to differentiate it from that portion of the village of Mai Xa Thi on the eastern bank of Jones Creek.

**Colonel McQuown noted as a safety precaution "against mines and RPG rounds," the Marine infantry rode on top of LVTs rather than inside when they were used as troop carriers. McQuown Comments.

***Colonel McQuown related that he turned over his prisoners together with weapons and documents to the 3d Marine Division: "These NVA troops were fresh, mostly young males, and carried brand new weapons . . ." including a flame thrower and a "fragmentation grenade launcher 'far superior to its U.S. counterpart'." Relative to the flame thrower, McQuown observed, "this was the first and only time we had seen one in the hands of the NVA." McQuown Comments.

Under questioning, the two prisoners declared they were part of a small detachment from a heavy weapons company and an advance party of their regiment. Their mission had been to provide RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) support for the 270th unit in Mai Xa Thi against Marine amphibian tractors and tanks in the Cua Viet sector. Both prisoners claimed that the bulk of their regiment was to infiltrate south on the night of 1–2 March, but gave conflicting accounts. According to the lieutenant, the rest of the regiment was to cross the Ben Hai River, just west of the so-called "Freedom Bridge" into South Vietnam and that the final destination of the regiment was Quang Tri City. The private, on the other hand, related that the regiment would cross the Ben Hai by boat near the ocean and then infiltrate into the Cua Viet sector. Although cooperative, the 18-year-old enlisted man had little other information except that "they had orders to remain close to the Cua Viet." While the lieutenant may have known more of the big picture, his Marine interrogators were suspicious of his testimony. They reported that "the captive continually tried to lie throughout the interrogation" and that "his reliability could not be determined."⁵⁰

While the intelligence of a new North Vietnamese unit in the Cua Viet pointed to the continued presence of enemy units in this vital area, the Marines had already started their own buildup in the sector. With his new command post at the Cua Viet base, Colonel Hull, the 3d Marines commander, had just taken control of the operation. The forces in Napoleon/Saline included both BLT 3/1 and the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion. On 4 March, Hull's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines joined the operation, moving up from the Quang Tri base to the Cua Viet sector. The following day, there was another adjustment of forces, but this was an exchange of missions rather than a reinforcement. BLT 2/4 under Lieutenant Colonel William Weise redeployed from the Lancaster II area of operations to the Napoleon/Saline operation, replacing BLT 3/1. The latter battalion then took the place of the former in the Lancaster area of operations.^{51****}

****Colonel Bruce F. Meyers, who at the time commanded SLF Alpha, observed that BLT 2/4 remained under the administrative control of the SLF commander for medical evacuation of casualties and "a significant portion of logistic support," even while under the operational control of various regimental commanders. He recalled that the embarked SLF helicopter squadron, HMM-363, helilifted BLT 3/1 to Camp Carroll and in exchange brought BLT 2/4 to the Cua Viet sector. Col Bruce F. Meyers, Comments on draft, dtd 20Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File).



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A194604

Marines of BLT 2/4 ride amphibian tractors (LVTs) in the Cua Viet during Operation Napoleon/Saline. Note the sandbags on the tractors to protect the Marines from explosive rounds. The BLT redeployed from the Lancaster area to the coastal Napoleon sector in early March.

Even with the enemy reinforcement in his sector, the addition of another battalion to his forces permitted Colonel Hull to undertake expanded operations on both sides of the Cua Viet. While at the beginning of the month, the North Vietnamese continued their attempts to interdict the river, they eventually limited these efforts to attacks by fire. On 8 March, the Navy announced that the Cua Viet was open and that allied shipping no longer required convoys.⁵²

Still the enemy was far from quiescent. On 10 March, enemy artillery hit the Cua Viet base, igniting 150 short tons of ammunition. The resulting explosion and fire caused the death of one American serviceman and injuries to several others. It also destroyed a mess hall, a communications van, and 47 out of the 64 sites holding 10,000-gallon POL bladders. By the end of the month, the base had only repaired or replenished 60 percent of the sites, equipment, and supplies destroyed in the attack.⁵³

In several sharp encounters north of the Cua Viet during the month, Marine infantry sweeps also met with stiff resistance. Lieutenant Colonel Weise's BLT

2/4, just arrived in the sector, bore the brunt of this fighting. On 18 March, one of the bloodiest actions occurred in an abandoned hamlet about 1,000 meters southwest of Mai Xa Thi (West). Supported by artillery north of the DMZ and with well-designed fields of fire for their small arms and machine guns, the entrenched enemy held off three companies of BLT 2/4 throughout the day. With the assistance of their own artillery and close air strikes, the Marines finally forced the enemy to withdraw. After entering the hamlet the next day, the Marines found 72 bodies and captured 4 prisoners. Other sources estimated that the enemy death toll may have been as high as 130 as a result of the airstrikes on the retreating forces. The cost had been high to the Marines as well. BLT 2/4 suffered casualties of 13 dead and 110 wounded. For the entire month in Operation Napoleon/Saline, the 3d Marine Division reported to have killed more than 440 of the enemy while sustaining in turn 65 fatalities and over 450 wounded. According to Lieutenant Colonel Weise, the Marines were doing the best they could in a "very active area." Weise praised Colonel Hull, the 3d

Marines commander and in charge of the operation, calling him, "an extremely competent Marine, a good leader," but "frustrated as we all were without adequate resources to do the job . . ."⁵⁴

During the month, there were also continued clashes to the west of Napoleon/Saline in the 2d ARVN Regiment sector and in the 9th Marines' Kentucky area of operations. Located between Napoleon/Saline and Kentucky, the 2d ARVN operated largely east of Route 1 and west of Jones Creek. For the most part, the ARVN regiment gave a good account of itself. In their most significant engagement, on 12 March just east of Route 1 and about 2,000 meters below Gio Linh, the South Vietnamese unit claimed to have killed over 200 of the enemy at a cost of 4 ARVN killed and 15 wounded.⁵⁵

Further to the west along the DMZ front, the North Vietnamese remained active in the 9th Marines' Kentucky sector. Most of the action centered in the area between Gio Linh and Con Thien. On 3 March, in one of the more significant of the encounters, Company L, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines intercepted an NVA battalion attempting to infiltrate the Marine positions. The battalion maintained a two-company outpost on Hill 28 just north of the A-3 Strong Point, manned by Companies I and L. On the morning of the 3d, Captain Roger Zensen, the Company L commander, accompanied his 2d Platoon on a reconnaissance patrol to the northwest. Just before noon, at one of the patrol checkpoints, the Marines "spotted an NVA soldier about 800-1,000 meters to the north. He appeared to be an officer with binoculars scanning the terrain to the south in our direction." Zensen recalled that the platoon sergeant asked him for permission to shoot at the man with a M16, but the company commander denied the request so as not to give away their position. Captain Zensen later wrote, "Oh if we only had our snipers, it would have been a sure kill." Instead he had his enlisted artillery forward observer call in a fire mission. The Marine platoon then checked out the area "right along the southern edge of the DMZ." While finding no enemy casualties, there was "obvious evidence of recent activity."⁵⁶

At that point, the Marine platoon came under rifle and grenade fire. The Marines returned fire but the enemy troops continued to close and Captain Zensen requested reinforcements. The only available forces were two platoons of his own company on Hill 28, 600-800 meters to the southeast. At the same time, an air observer called in fixed-wing airstrikes and helped to coordinate artillery missions. Zensen remembered that the enemy "moved in close to avoid the air strikes" and

also "circled our right flank." Another 20 or so enemy troops took up position to the Marine rear, taking cover in a bomb shelter. With the assistance of machine gun fire, the platoon prevented the NVA from advancing any further until the "AO was able to direct the fire of Huey gunships at the enemy and silence" one of the positions. By this time, the two other platoons arrived and reinforced both flanks. As the company disengaged, enemy artillery fired upon them, but "fortunately was not on target." In the skirmish, the Marine reports showed over 100 of the enemy killed at a cost of one Marine dead and 13 wounded.* Zensen called it "a hell of a fight and a scary afternoon." He observed that lucky for the Marines the enemy force "was apparently on the move and had not fortified their positions."

A few days later, on 16 March, again near the A-3 Strong Point, Companies M, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines and C, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines clashed with another battalion-sized enemy force. The two Marine companies called in artillery and air upon the North Vietnamese troops. Under the supporting arms bombardment, the bulk of the enemy battalion disengaged, but left a company behind to fight a rear guard action. North Vietnamese artillery from north of the DMZ answered the American supporting arms with a 400-round barrage of its own on the Marines. According to one Marine report, because of the "inaccuracy of the hastily delivered enemy artillery," the two Marine companies "assaulted into the enemy trenches, killing 83 NVA before contact was broken at 1530." Marine casualties were two killed and nine wounded. For the entire month in Operation Kentucky, the 9th Marines reported over 400 enemy dead while Marine casualties were 37 killed and more than 200 wounded.^{57**}

*Lieutenant Colonel Zensen commented that he believed that the official listing of enemy casualties was exaggerated, but stated that "it is hard to know just how many enemy soldiers were killed." The reports also indicate that Marine snipers killed the enemy officer with binoculars, which was not the case. LtCol Roger Zensen, Comments on draft, dtd 4Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

**Lieutenant Colonel Otto Lehrack, who commanded Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, observed that Company M, earlier on 6 March, in the same area as Company L on 3 March, encountered a sizeable enemy force with the Marines sustaining casualties of 15 dead and a number of wounded. [For a detailed account of that action, see LtCol Otto J. Lehrack, *No Shining Armor, The Marines at War in Vietnam, An Oral History* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1992), pp. 243-52.] Lehrack then observed that all of these actions including the one of 16 February took place along a major infiltration route which included Route 561 and an area that the Marines called the "Marketplace." He believed that the battalion "forays into this area presented the NVA with little choice but to fight." LtCol Otto Lehrack, Comments on draft, dtd 19Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

Further to the west, in the 4th Marines' Lancaster II operation, the tempo of enemy activity remained relatively low. For the month of March, the regiment reported killing nearly 60 enemy dead and capturing 2 prisoners while sustaining 13 killed and over 140 wounded. An enemy ambush of Company K, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines in the hills 3,000 meters west of Ca Lu caused most of the Marine casualties for the month, accounting for all of the dead and nearly half of the wounded. After completing an unsuccessful search for suspected enemy mortars on the high ground, the Marine company had started down towards Route 9. Enemy 60mm mortars caught the company in the open resulting in 13 killed, and over 40 wounded. Among the more seriously wounded was the company commander, Captain Alexander K. Ward. While evacuating all of the wounded, the Marines had to leave behind eight of the dead. A reconnaissance team finally retrieved the bodies four days later.⁵⁸

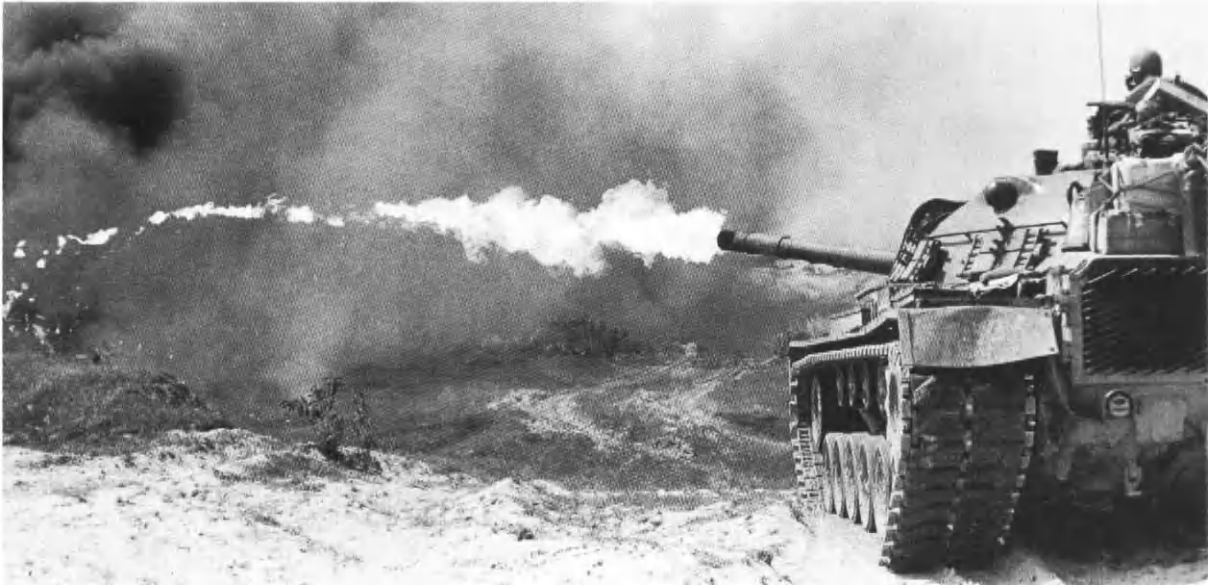
In northern I Corps, nevertheless, by the end of the month, especially along the DMZ front, the situation

for the allies had improved dramatically. For the most part, with the notable exception of that portion of Route 9 from Ca Lu to Khe Sanh, the supply lines were now open. With the opening of Route 1, Brigadier General Glick moved the rest of the 3d Marine Division (Rear) from Phu Bai to the Quang Tri base. During the month, Marine and allied trucks made over 2,000 resupply runs between Phu Bai and Quang Tri. In the last week of the month, III MAF moved over 3,866 short tons of supply from Dong Ha to Ca Lu. All told for March, 162 American truck convoys carried over 12,690 short tons of cargo in northern I Corps. The sea lanes and river routes also remained active. With the opening of Wunder Beach and the installation of the pontoon causeway there on 17 March, the allies landed more than 10,000 short tons. All of the ports in the north during the month registered record tonnage unloaded. The logistic situation had improved to the extent that III MAF lifted the limitation on equipment and material beyond just the combat essential. In fact, while not bringing in additional construc-

A Marine Sikorsky UH-34D Sea Horse helicopter is about to land with supplies as U.S. Army troopers from the 5th Armored Cavalry Regiment watch from their armored personnel carrier. The Army unit was under the operational control of the 3d Marine Division for a joint operation with BLT 2/4.

Photo is from the Abel Collection
PHOTO IS FROM THE ABEL COLLECTION





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371414

A Marine M67A2 flametank in a blocking position and in support of Company I, 3d Battalion, 27th Marines aims a streak of fire at suspected enemy positions in the Da Nang area of operations. The 27th Marines, newly arrived in February, began conducting small unit operations in late February and early March.

tion materials for the barrier strongpoint system, Marine engineers completed the strongpoint bunkers on Con Thien, made some minor repairs of bunkers damaged by artillery, and installed an additional minefield for the strongpoint at Gio Linh. At Ca Lu, Marine and Army engineers and Navy Seabees had started the building of a major base to include an airfield, ammunition storage facilities, bunkers and helicopter reverments, and a supporting road network.⁵⁹

By the end of the month, the allies in the north were about prepared to launch their counteroffensive for the relief of Khe Sanh and to alleviate the pressure on the DMZ front. On 28 March, the 1st Air Cavalry Division took over from the 3d Marine Division and the 4th Marines in Lancaster II the responsibility for the combat base at Ca Lu. While the 3d Marine Division complained that the construction of the facilities at Ca Lu and the effort to keep Route 9 open from Dong Ha to the base restricted its mobility to a certain extent, the division still prepared to carry out its own limited offensive. As a counter to any enemy tank threat in the north and to provide the Marines on the DMZ a more potent armored punch, in March, MACV had attached to the 3d Marine Division the U.S. Army 3d Squadron, 5th Armored Cavalry Regiment reinforced by a company from the 2d Battalion, 34th Armored Regiment. On 29 March, General Tompkins formed, under the

command of Colonel Hull, the 3d Marines' command, Task Force Kilo, which consisted of the Army armored cavalry squadron and BLT 2/4. The following day, in coordination with the 2d ARVN Regiment, Task Force Kilo mounted an attack in the Gio Linh sector as a cover for the Pegasus operation. The allied counteroffensive in the north was underway.^{60*}

March Operations in the Rest of I Corps

By the beginning of March, the enemy main force units, outside of Thua Thien and Quang Tri Provinces, pretty much lay low. In the Americal Division operation Wheeler-Wallowa in the Que Son Valley, the 196th Light Infantry Brigade accounted for about the same number of enemy dead as the previous month, while sustaining about a quarter less casualties. As far as the Americal Division's Operation Muscatine south of Chu Lai was concerned, III MAF listed it among several operations that "did not have any significant combat." Still, as General Cushman observed, the Communist forces in I Corps had largely won the countryside "by default" as the ARVN, South Vietnamese militia forces, and Revolutionary Development teams during Tet fell back to defend the cities and

*See Chapter 14 for further discussion of Task Force Kilo and its relationship to Operation Pegasus.



Top photo is from Abel Collection while the bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A372933.
Top, Marines from a 60mm mortar section of the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines run from a landing zone in the "Arizona Territory" southwest of Da Nang. The last man has the mortar base strapped across his shoulders while the mortar tube can be seen carried by the Marine in front of him. Below, Marines during Operation Worth form a chain to move supplies out of a landing zone in "Happy Valley."



towns. According to U.S. measurements, GVN control in the countryside reached its lowest point in March.⁶¹

In much of southern I Corps, however, the American and South Vietnamese forces in March began to reenter the hamlets abandoned to the Viet Cong. Lost in the reporting of these numerous engagements was a 16 March 1968 United Press dispatch describing an operation by Task Force Barker of the Americal Division's 11th Light Infantry Brigade in the hamlet of My Lai, called "Pink Village" by the American troops. According to the news report, "'Pink Village' had become 'Red, White, and Blue' Village." A U.S. spokesman reported that the American troops had killed "128 Communists." The 128 "Communists," however, turned out to be all villagers, mostly women, children, and old men. It would be nearly a year later when the details about the My Lai massacre surfaced.^{62*}

In the large Da Nang area of operations, the 1st Marine Division faced many of the same circumstances that the Americal Division did—a low-level war fought in the surrounding hamlets and villages. In regimental reserve, the newly arrived 1st Battalion, 27th Marines spent much of March getting acclimated and adjusted to its new mission. Second Lieutenant William R. Black, Jr., a platoon commander with Company A, remembered that his company conducted a lot of patrols to keep "on our toes tactically while getting our act together." Lieutenant Black admitted that the battalion was still not too effective as the troops were still unfamiliar with their sector and not yet battle-hardened. While the other two battalions of the 27th Marines were more active, their great concern remained surprise firing devices. Overall, the regiment undertook over 2,900 small unit patrols throughout its TAOR resulting in about 310 contacts, 182 initiated by the Marines and the remainder by the VC.⁶³

The Communist forces made only one serious attack on the Da Nang base in March and that was limited to a series of rocket bombardments. On 4 March, beginning at 0100 and lasting until 0255, enemy gunners fired some 50 122mm missiles onto the base. Nine landed near the 7th Communication Battalion, six on the FLC compound near Red Beach, and the remainder at the Marble Mountain Facility. The rocket attacks resulted in 6 deaths and nearly 30 wounded. They also destroyed 1 CH-53 and damaged 37 other helicopters and observation aircraft. Lieutenant Colonel William S. Fagan, commander of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines at the time, remembered "our primary and overriding mission . . .

was to prevent the enemy from firing his 122mm rockets toward the Da Nang vital area." His battalion sent out squad-sized patrols and ambushes "every day and night with emphasis on night." He estimated that "virtually half of our infantry squads, with normal attachments, were on ambush every night." According to Fagan, the enemy was able to fire only a few rockets successfully from his sector, but there "was fairly continuous enemy contact with casualties on both sides."⁶⁴

Based on intelligence that the Communist forces continued to work on upgrading their road network from *Base Area 607* northwest of Da Nang and possibly infiltrating units south into "Happy Valley" and the "Arizona Territory" (named after the U.S. western badlands), the usual approaches to the base from the mountains to the west, the 7th Marines launched two spoiling attacks. In the first, Operation Rock, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines conducted a one-battalion sweep on the peninsula formed by the Vu Gia and Thu Bon Rivers, the so-called "Arizona Territory," about 6,000 meters northwest of the battalion's base area at An Hoa. During the four days of the operation, from 6–10 March, the Marines encountered only small units, sustaining casualties of 3 dead and 24 wounded while killing about 35 of the enemy. On 13 March, in the second operation, Operation Worth, the 1st and 2d Battalions, 7th Marines supported by tanks of the U.S. Army's 3d Squadron, 5th Armored Cavalry, entered into the anything but "Happy Valley." In the nearly two-week operation, which ended on 26 March, the Marines and Army tankers only met scattered resistance. Still the Marines took casualties of 27 dead and 89 wounded and killed an estimated 160 of the enemy.⁶⁵

In March, while the Marine units at Da Nang continued to hold their own, to the north, Task Force X-Ray consolidated its area of operations and made the necessary adjustments with the Provisional Corps. With the formal end of Operation Hue City on 2 March, General LaHue, the Task Force X-Ray commander, started to bring the respective battalions under the 1st Marines back to their own sectors. The two 5th Marines battalions that participated in Hue City, the 1st and 2d Battalions, rejoined their parent regiment in the 5th Marines' Operation Houston in the Phu Loc District. LaHue assigned the 1st Marines the defense of the Phu Bai vital area and Col Co/Tan My naval support activity with two battalions, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines which moved up from Operation Houston. At the same time, the two Army battalions in Operation Houston, the 2d Battalion,

*See Chapter 29 for further discussion of My Lai.

502d Regiment and the 1st Battalion, 327th Regiment reverted to Army control.⁶⁶

While trying to build up the defenses of Phu Bai and protect Route 1 and the vital water routes, General LaHue also wanted to expand operations into the approaches towards both the base and the city of Hue. On 3 March, giving the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, two battalions—the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and the 2d Battalion, 327th Airborne Regiment—LaHue ordered the Army brigade, still under his operational control, to conduct an operation in the old Cumberland area, along Route 547, the gateway to the A Shau Valley. Lasting only four days, from 3 March until 7 March, the two-battalion operation, code-named Mingo, had little to show for the effort except for five dead VC and two captured rifles. Faced with the changing command relations with the establishment of Provisional Corps, General LaHue cut short the operation.⁶⁷

On 8 March, two days before the activation of Prov Corps, III MAF implemented the agreed-upon change of boundaries between Task Force X-Ray and the new command. Task Force X-Ray retained responsibility for the Phu Bai vital area and Phu Loc District with the 1st Marines in the former and the 5th Marines in the latter. General LaHue returned the two U.S. Army brigades under his operational control, the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division and the 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division, to Army Major General Olinto M. Barsanti, the commander of the 101st, who had just established his command post to the west of Phu Bai. The 101st was to take over the expanse between the 1st Air Cavalry at Camp Evans and Task Force X-Ray at Phu Bai. This included the area around Hue, Route 1 north of Phu Bai, the Col Co/Tan My area, and Route 547 towards the A Shau Valley.⁶⁸

With a smaller area of operations and with five infantry battalions under his operational control, General LaHue decided upon a three-phased operation to the east of Phu Bai. The first phase, Operation Ford, was to be a two-battalion sweep of the Phu Thu Peninsula which had long been a staging area for the *804th Main Force Battalion*. He gave the mission to Colonel Stanley S. Hughes, the 1st Marines commander, and coordinated the operation with the 1st ARVN Division Lam Son 194 to the north of the Marines. On 14 March, Marine helicopters deposited in landing zones, the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines on the northern, and the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines on the southern part of the peninsula. The two battalions then began to advance towards one another. In

several sharp clashes, the two Marine battalions killed 145 of the enemy and captured 5 prisoners. The Marines lost 14 men dead, including a Navy corpsman, and sustained 113 wounded. On 20 March, Task Force X-Ray closed out the operation. General LaHue canceled the planned second and third phases of Operation Ford.⁶⁹

By this time, the planning for Pegasus, the relief operation for Khe Sanh, was in full swing. The 1st Air Cavalry Division prepared to close out its Operation Jeb Stuart and move to its new staging area at Ca Lu. With the westward deployment of the 1st Cavalry Division, the 101st Airborne Division was to move to a new operating area some 18 miles northwest of Hue. At the same time, the 1st Marines with its 1st and 2d Battalions, reinforced by the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, was to join the 1st Air Cavalry in Operation Pegasus. Task Force X-Ray was to take over then the area vacated by the 101st Airborne Division.⁷⁰

Brigadier General LaHue, thus once more, was to expand his area of operations, while at the same time having fewer troops to do so. At the end of the month, Major General Donn J. Robertson, the 1st Marine Division commander, provided some relief by transferring one of the 27th Marines' battalions, the 1st Battalion, from Da Nang to assume the security of Route 1 between Hue and Phu Bai and the protection of the ColCo/Tan My base. The battalion relieved the remaining Army units still there and operated almost to the suburbs of Hue. At the same time, General LaHue expanded the 5th Marines' Houston area to include the remaining portion of the X-Ray TAOR, excluding the area occupied by the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines and the Phu Bai Vital Area. At the same time, the task force commander ordered the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines with two companies to take over from the 1st Marines the protection of key outposts and bridges, especially the Truoi River Bridge on Route 1 southeast of Phu Bai.⁷¹

While Task Force X-Ray made these various adjustments, the Communists were not slow to take advantage of what they perceived as possible chinks in the American defenses. On 21 March, in a relatively minor attack, enemy gunners fired some 20 mortar and rocket rounds on the Phu Bai Base, which resulted in two Marines wounded and some structural damage to a building. Five days later, between 0300 and 0330 on the morning of the 26th, however, 108 122mm rockets and nearly 80 82mm mortar rounds fell upon both the airfield and the

Phu Bai compound. This barrage resulted in 4 dead, 2 Marine and 2 ARVN, and 46 wounded, most of whom were Marines. Despite hitting the airfield, the Force Logistic Support Group sector, and an ARVN training area, the rockets and mortars caused only relatively light damage to three aircraft, two helicopters and a C-117D transport, and destroyed two 10,000-gallon fuel bladders.⁷²

Instead of further bombardments on the Phu Bai base, on 31 March 1968, under cover of a mortar and ground attack, enemy sappers successfully placed demolitions on the Truoi River Bridge and a smaller bridge, designated Bridge No. 4. The K-2 VC Battalion with three companies reinforced by three sapper platoons had simultaneously attacked the two bridge outposts and a nearby Combined Action Platoon, CAP H-3. Alerted by one of their ambushes, the Combined Action Marines repulsed the enemy attack after it reached the outer wire. The bridge outposts were not so lucky. Both the Truoi Bridge and Bridge No. 4 sustained substantive damage with both bridges impassable for motor traffic and Bridge No. 4 to foot traffic as well. Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines had placed two squads on the smaller bridge supported by a machine gun and a recoilless rifle and a platoon supported by two machine guns and two mortars on the Truoi River Bridge. The attacking force on Bridge No. 4 killed eight Marines and wounded seven more. On the Truoi River Bridge, the Marine platoon sustained casualties of 6 dead and 23 wounded. The Communists lost a total of 12 men in the attacks. In an investigation of the attack, Colonel Bohn, the 5th Marines commander, reported "the strength of the security forces was adequate." He blamed the success of the enemy attack partially on the fact that the company was new to the sector and had only occupied these positions the day before.⁷³

Although the Marines improved their defensive dispositions and coordination of supporting arms and placement of reaction forces, Task Force X-Ray at the end of the month was hard pressed to maintain any initiative. Originally Task Force X-Ray had planned to expand operations in April, but General LaHue admitted that he had postponed the detailed planning for these undertakings. Any new offensive actions "were contingent upon the developing situation and what economies of forces can be instituted . . ." Still if the war had reached a stalemate in the Task Force X-Ray area of operations, the allies

were ready to launch their major counteroffensive in the north.⁷⁴

Regaining the Initiative

While the much-heralded relief of Khe Sanh, Operation Pegasus, grabbed most of the attention, the allies in April appeared to have regained the initiative in most of I Corps. According to U.S. pacification statistics, 7,000 more civilians in I Corps were living in secure areas than the previous month, marking the first increase since the enemy Tet offensive. In what amounted to a corps-wide offensive, III MAF conducted 17 major operations of battalion-size or larger, resulting in over 3,500 enemy casualties. The South Vietnamese were also active. In Quang Tin Province, for example, the 2d Battalion, 6th ARVN Regiment opened up 15 miles of road between the district town of Tien Phouc and the province capital of Tam Ky. For the most part, however, in the three southern provinces of I Corps, the Communist forces avoided battle and limited most of their activity to scattered guerrilla attacks and mines and boobytraps.⁷⁵

At Da Nang, as in the rest of southern I Corps, the 1st Marine Division reported that "irregular activity . . . continues to inflict more casualties than actual contact with the enemy." At the same time, however, the division for the first time since Tet began offensive operations about 12 miles south of the airbase in the Go Noi Island, formed by the channels of the Thu Bon, Ky Lam, and Ba Ren Rivers. From 10-14 April, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines conducted Operation Jasper Square in the western Go Noi. In the four days of the operation, the battalion killed 54 of the enemy at the price of 6 Marine dead and 30 wounded. While the operation ended on the 14th, the 3d Battalion remained in the Go Noi "with all units becoming part of the Da Nang TAOR."⁷⁶

In the interlude, Marine and Army radar imagery aircraft and "Stingray" reconnaissance patrols reported continued enemy improvement of the enemy road network leading through Charlie Ridge into Happy Valley and also into the Arizona Territory and Go Noi Island sectors. The Marine reconnaissance teams not only observed enemy troop movement, but also directed artillery and air onto the enemy forces. For example, on the morning of 7 April, one Stingray patrol with the radio call sign "May Fly" from its perch on a ridgeline looking into



Photo courtesy of LtCol Charles E. Mueller, (USMC) Ret

Prior to Operation Allen Brook, MajGen Donn J. Robertson briefs syndicated columnist Joseph Alsop on the situation at Da Nang. Trudging up the hill to view the terrain are LtCol Charles E. Mueller, the commander of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, in the lead, followed by Gen Robertson, then Mr. Alsop. Two of the Marines are carrying what appears to be a briefing map.

the Arizona spotted some 200 main force troops wearing green utilities, helmets, and flak jackets. The Marines called in helicopter gunships and an artillery fire mission. "May Fly" reported 51 of the enemy killed. During the rest of the day and through the night of 8 April, the reconnaissance team counted nearly 170 more enemy troops in nine sightings which resulted in an estimated 70 enemy dead. Later in the month, from 23 April through the 30th, two other Marine Stingray teams, one overlooking the Arizona and the other the Go Noi, in 17 sightings, reported nearly 370 enemy troops moving through the Thu Bon and Vu Gia River Valleys and claimed 191 of the enemy killed by Marine supporting arms.⁷⁷

On 27 April, III MAF organized Operation Quick Track, under Lieutenant Colonel John F. T. Kelly, of the III MAF G-2 staff, to track the 2d NVA Division. According to Marine intelligence, the enemy division had retreated southwest to the Laotian border after the failure of its Tet campaign, but was planning now to mount a new offensive in

the Da Nang area of operations. With his command post on Hill 55 south of Da Nang, Lieutenant Colonel Kelly's task force consisted of a small headquarters, the provisional company of the 1st Reconnaissance Company, a detachment of Sub-Unit 1, 1st Radio Battalion with signal intelligence capability, and the U.S. Army Special Forces 14th Company, Mobile Strike Force and the 245th Surveillance Airplane Company, 16th Aviation Group. The 1st Marine Division and 1st Marine Aircraft Wing would provide support when necessary. Task Force Kelly, named after its commander, began its first inserts on 30 April and continued the operation into May. According to Kelly, Operation Quick Track reflected Lieutenant General Cushman's "innovative use of intelligence to track ahead of the enemy rather than report history."⁷⁸

With the obvious movement of enemy regulars into the western and southern avenues of approach to the Da Nang base, General Robertson decided upon a series of preemptive operations. In the first, Operation Ballard, on 29 April, the 7th Marines sent one

battalion into the Charlie Ridge area. At the same time, both the 7th and 27th Marines prepared to conduct a two-regiment operation, Operation Allan Brook in the Go Noi. This would then be followed by another 7th Marines operation, later called Mameluke Thrust, into both the Arizona and Happy Valley regions. As one regimental commander observed, these operations reflected a III MAF "change of emphasis . . . to go after the enemy in his base camps, rather than attempt to interdict him by patrols close into the vital area."⁷⁹*

In April, however, the capability of the 1st Marine Division to conduct these expanded operations was fairly limited, especially in the Task Force X-Ray sectors at Phu Bai and in Phu Loc. As Brigadier General LaHue, the Task Force X-Ray commander admitted, whenever the division mounted such an operation it was taking a chance of reducing the density of operations. With four of the nine infantry battalions of the 1st Division assigned to X-Ray, LaHue stated that he had adequate forces to "do assigned operations . . . [but] not adequate . . . to go after the enemy" According to LaHue, he could "keep Highway 1 open, aggressively patrol, and keep after the enemy in some strength." His tenure at Phu Bai, however, was about over. On 7 April, Brigadier General John N. McLaughlin relieved LaHue as the commander of Task Force X-Ray. The latter returned to Da Nang where a week later, Brigadier General George D. Webster replaced him there as the assistant division commander.⁸⁰

The Phu Bai forces under McLaughlin operated much the same as they did under LaHue. The 5th Marines continued its expanded Houston operation. On 13 April, in a no-name operation, literally called No Name No. 2, the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines ran into two North Vietnamese companies, probably from the *804th Main Force Battalion*, in a fortified hamlet along a small canal north of Route 1 and a few miles east of Hue. According to Second Lieutenant William R. Black, Jr., of Company A, "the enemy [was] in [a] great situation to fight us off" When Black's 2d Platoon reached the hamlet, the company's 3d Platoon, under Second Lieutenant Roger Charles had already been hit hard and trying to withdraw. Black later wrote his family:

In retrospect, I now know I should have written up Lieutenant Charles for a decoration. He had advanced as close to the enemy as he could get. He had lost his radio to enemy fire. He was taking care of the wounded man near him. He guided the rest of us as we arrived at this position to help, & he continued to fight the enemy. At the time, I was naive enough to think that this was expected of us, as routine combat performance by a good Marine.

The Marine battalion lost 24 dead and 37 wounded while accounting for an estimated 60 of the enemy. On the following day, Easter Sunday, the Marines picked up the dead. Lieutenant Black several years later remembered the scene as a macabre "Easter Procession—pulling dead bodies back in ponchos."⁸¹**

From 19–26 April, in a rice-denial operation, the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines supported by two ARVN battalions conducted Operation Baxter Garden on the Phu Thu Peninsula. During the seven-day operation, the Marines engaged enemy platoon-sized forces, but for the most part met up with scattered enemy groups. Most of the Marine casualties were the result of triggering enemy land mines. The Marines sustained 13 dead and 125 wounded while killing 55 of the enemy. At the end of the month, Task Force X-Ray continued to be responsible for an expanding area of operations with limited forces.⁸²

While the 1st Air Cavalry Division ended its participation in Operation Pegasus on 15 April, the air-mobile division and the 101st Airborne Division undertook the long-postponed offensive in the A Shau Valley.^{***} For some time, American commanders had viewed with concern the activity of the enemy to improve his lines of communication leading from the A Shau into Quang Nam Province and also towards

**William Black commented that "in the Episcopal Church, where I grew up, the Easter 'procession' is a glorious parade by the choir, acolytes, priest, and children into the church at the beginning of the Easter worship service. It is a vivid and joyful celebration of Christ's triumph over death. Hence the irony that hit me that Easter morning" In his letter to his parents, he remarked upon battlefield discipline of the enemy: "He not only took with him his own wounded (& did *something* with his dead if he did not take them too); he even gathered up his spent cartridges and took them. In the very trench that he had fought us for five hrs, we could hardly find a spent cartridge! The enemy knows how to discourage us. We found bits of meat in trenches where direct arty hits had destroyed the enemy, but we only found *two* enemy bodies." William R. Black, Comments on draft, dtd 4Jan95 and attached ltr to parents, dtd 20–21Apr68 (Vietnam Comment File).

***The 2d Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, however, remained at Khe Sanh under the operational control of the 3d Marine Division. See Chapter 14. For the earlier planning for A Shau operations, see the discussion of the proposed York operations in Chapter 1.

*See Chapter 17 for coverage of Operations Allan Brook and Mameluke Thrust.

the approaches to Hue. For example, on 28 March, an aerial photo reconnaissance mission over the valley revealed the existence of what Marine intelligence officers dubbed the "Yellow Brick Road," a newly constructed corduroy road extending from the A Shau through Laos and *Base Area 607* into Quang Nam Province. Beginning on 19 April, after two days of B-52 preparatory strikes in the valley, the 3d Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry and the 1st Brigade of the 101st reinforced by an ARVN airborne task force began Operation Delaware in the A Shau.⁸³

For about a month, units of the two Army divisions conducted a series of "leap-frog" helicopter assault operations throughout the length and breadth of the A Shau. While initially encountering heavy antiaircraft fire, U.S. supporting air and artillery eventually silenced the enemy guns.* The Army troops met mostly local enemy rear echelon troops and engineers, but occasionally fought engagements with regular infantry. At the end of the operation, the Americans reported killing 735 of the Communist soldiers, while suffering 142 dead and 731 wounded. The ARVN task force lost 26 killed and 132 wounded. As General Cushman observed, the A Shau was "not a . . . a fortress of combat troops . . . , but . . . a highway, you might say, for logistics supply and for the movement of reinforcements and replacements." The allies captured huge caches of enemy weapons, equipment, ammunition, foodstuffs and other military supplies including more than 70 trucks, two bulldozers, and a destroyed PT-76 tank from the *3d Battalion, 203d Tank Regiment* before the operation concluded.⁸⁴

To fill in the gap in the forces in the north during the Delaware A Shau operation, General Cushman, with the concurrence of MACV, transferred the Americal Division's 196th Light Infantry Brigade to the operational control of General Rosson in Prov Corps. In turn, the Prov Corps commander assigned the new brigade to Camp Evans as the corps reserve under the operational control of the 1st Air Cavalry Division. About the same time, on 18 April, after the close of Operation Pegasus, the 26th Marines moved

from Khe Sanh to the Quang Tri base and took over the area of operations there. Further north at Dong Ha, the 3d Marine Division had established a small division reserve built around an armored task force, called Task Force Robbie, after the nickname of its commander, Colonel Clifford J. Robichaud, the former division inspector.^{85**}

For the larger part of April, the three 3d Marine Division operations along the DMZ, Lancaster II, Kentucky, and Napoleon/Saline, continued with most of the same forces as they had the previous month. As a sub-operation of Lancaster II, from 12-16 April, BLT 3/1 carried out Operation Charlton in the Ba Long Valley. The battalion captured one crew-served weapon and held 56 detainees, but sustained 11 wounded. While in April, the 3d Marine Division reported higher enemy activity in the form of artillery, mortar, and rocket attacks on Marine positions on the DMZ front, the number of American and Communist casualties in Operation Kentucky were actually lower than the previous month. In Operation Lancaster II, however, at the end of April, the North Vietnamese increased their artillery bombardment of Camp Carroll to about 40-50 rounds a day.⁸⁶

In the Cua Viet sector at the end of the month, the enemy posed the greatest threat. On 27 April, the Navy's Task Force Clearwater warned III MAF that the enemy was apparently preparing to interdict the waterway. North Vietnamese artillery and rocket attacks on the port facilities at the mouth of the Cua Viet and the offloading ramps at Dong Ha also increased. On 29 April, the ARVN 2d Regiment engaged an NVA unit from the *320th NVA Division*. During the night of 29-30 April, enemy machine gunners opened up on Navy patrol craft in the Cua

* Lieutenant General Richard E. Carey, who served in Vietnam in 1968 as a lieutenant colonel and as a squadron leader, observed that during Delaware, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing "provided massive fixed wing and helo support for an entire day." He recalled that the Army lost several helicopters in several minutes and required the Marine air since the Army units were out of range of Army heavy artillery. LtGen Richard E. Carey, Comments on draft, dtd 12Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

** According to Lieutenant Colonel Karl J. Fontenot, Major General Tompkins established Task Force Robbie in mid-February. Fontenot while still commanding the 3d Tank Battalion also served as the executive officer of the task force. He recalled that General Tompkins "briefed us personally on his expectations which essentially was to form a very flexible organization ready for employment in any direction at any time." The task force made its headquarters at Cam Lo since it was a centralized position. While the task force organization was flexible, it usually consisted of a tank company; two Army M42 tracked vehicles mounting twin 40mm antiaircraft guns; two Army truck companies with trucks equipped with quad .50-caliber machine guns (M55); other assorted motor transport; an engineer detachment; and usually one rifle company. Fontenot wrote "TF Robbie made itself pretty visible in the division area with rapid moves over the roads to Camp Carroll, Dong Ha, etc." LtCol Karl J. Fontenot, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94] (Vietnam Comment File).

Viet from the Dai Do village complex about 1,000 meters north of Dong Ha. Colonel Hull sent BLT 2/4 to clear out the enemy. In fighting that would last nearly a month, the battle for Dong Ha with the NVA *320th Division* was joined and the enemy had begun a new offensive on the eastern DMZ to counter the allied thrusts to the west.^{87*}

From late February through the end of April, the allied forces in I Corps had regained the initiative. From Quang Ngai in the south to Quang Tri Province in the north, allied troops had taken a large toll of both enemy main force and guerrilla units. Still the cost had been high, and the enemy was far from defeated. Outside of the battlefield, events in Washington and Hanoi were also to influence the course of the war. On 31 March, in a televised speech to the nation, after a relatively poor showing earlier in the month in the New Hampshire primaries, President Johnson in a surprise statement announced his decision not to stand for reelection, to restrict the bomb-

ing campaign over North Vietnam,** and to authorize only a limited reinforcement of American troops in Vietnam. On 5 April, unexpectedly, the North Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Duy Trinh declared that his government was willing to negotiate with the Americans. The following month a North Vietnamese and American delegation met in Paris. In the meantime, with the arrival of the two Army divisions, the 101st and the 1st Air Cavalry, III MAF and Provisional Corps had entered the foreboding A Shau for the first time since 1966 and most importantly earlier had broken the siege of Khe Sanh.⁸⁸

**U.S. Army Colonel Bruce B. G. Clarke wrote that according to Army sources, at the time of the President's speech the 1st Air Cavalry Division was preparing plans for its next mission, Operation Delaware, after Operation Pegasus. According to Clarke, the planners developed a concept "to press west into Laos and then turn south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail into Laos to enter the A Shau Valley from the northwest rather than the east." Apparently "General Tolson shut off this planning by noting that the planners obviously hadn't heard the President's speech and what they were proposing was politically impossible." Col Bruce B. G. Clarke, USA, Comments on draft, n.d. [Apr95] (Vietnam Comment File).

*For the fighting at Dai Do and its aftermath see Chapter 15.

CHAPTER 14

The Siege of Khe Sanh

*Digging In—Opening Moves—"Incoming!"—The Fall of Khe Sanh Village
Reinforcement and Fighting Back—Round Two—The Fall of Lang Vei—The Intensifying Battle
Settling the Score—Operation Pegasus*

Digging In

By late January, U.S. planners at every level were determined to defend Khe Sanh, despite the suggested possibility of "another Dien Bien Phu."* General Westmoreland voiced numerous reasons for defending the remote outpost. It was a valuable base for monitoring North Vietnamese infiltration through Laos along the "Ho Chi Minh" and "Santa Fe" Trails.** It was also important to Westmoreland's planned invasion of Laos by which he intended physically to cut the trails. Moreover, Khe Sanh served as left flank security for the Strong Point Obstacle System, also known as the Dyemarker Project. Finally, and vitally significant when considering the unpopularity of the war to many Americans by 1968, was the psychological significance of Khe Sanh. While it had no intrinsic political importance, being neither a cultural nor economic center, to relinquish it in the face of North Vietnamese pressure would result in a major enemy propaganda victory.*** Admiral Ulysses S. Grant Sharp, Commander-in-Chief, Pacific, and Westmoreland's immediate superior, concurred in this analysis, saying "withdrawal from any portion of Vietnam would make immediate and sensational news, not only through the Western news media, but also through the Communist capitals as a major propaganda item."¹

At Khe Sanh, the 26th Marines had the responsibility to prevent the base from falling to the sur-



Unnumbered Department of Defense (USMC) Photo

An aerial view of the Khe Sanh Combat Base looking west was taken during the siege. The runway of the airstrip can be seen below and in the top right of the picture is what appears to be a rocket pod hanging below the aircraft taking the picture.

rounding Communist forces. With three infantry battalions, an artillery battalion, and a full range of supporting units, including tank and antitank detachments, antiaircraft weapons, engineers, shore party, air control, communications, and a host of others, Colonel David E. Lownds, the 26th Marines commander, continued improving his defenses.

The Marine positions arced around the combat base from the westnorthwest to the north, forming a line of heavily fortified, mutually supporting strongpoints. Seven kilometers northwest of the combat base, Company I and Company M occupied Hill 881 South, from which Company I sortied on 20 January

* See Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of the events preceding the Battle for Khe Sanh.

** The "Santa Fe" Trail was actually part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail network, entering South Vietnam from Laos northwest of Khe Sanh. See Chapter 3.

*** In his comments, General Westmoreland wrote that "the abandonment of that central terrain feature [Khe Sanh] would have made available to the enemy a route to the populated area near the coast. Our control of Khe Sanh forced the enemy to change his battle plans and to reduce the threat to the coastal areas and its population." Gen William C. Westmoreland, USA, Comments on draft, dtd 18Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File).

meeting heavy Communist resistance.* Three kilometers to the east of Hill 881 South, Company K sat atop Hill 861. The 2d Battalion's main position was on Hill 558, just over a kilometer east of Company K, overlooking the Song Rao Quan valley. Further still to the east, and almost four kilometers north of the combat base, the 2d Platoon of Company A sat high atop the dominant precipice known as Hill 950 to guard the radio relay site there. At the combat base proper, the 1st Battalion and Company L, 3d Battalion defended the airstrip with the headquarters elements, and the firing batteries of the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines.

Adjacent to the combat base and just north of Route 9 was the massive bunker complex of the secretive SOG Forward Operating Base 3 (FOB-3) whose members conducted clandestine anti-infiltration operations in Laos and along the border. Outlying defensive positions further south included those of Combined Action Platoons Oscar and the 915th Regional Force Company protecting the hamlets of Khe Sanh Village as well as the small MACV advisory team at the district headquarters located there. Further to the southwest was the Lang Vei Special Forces CIDG Camp located on Route 9, nine kilometers from the combat base and only two kilometers from the border with Laos.**

In every position, the defenders continuously worked to prepare for the coming battle. Following a visit to Khe Sanh, General Cushman directed that all fighting holes have overhead cover capable of withstanding direct hits from 82mm mortars and that the ammunition supply point be reorganized to provide better protection for the ammunition stocks, much of which were outside the revetments.² Fortification material was in short supply, but the Marines used many field expedients, including damaged portions of the airstrip's steel matting and metal pallets used for air delivery of supplies. Rolls of "German tape," with its razor-like edges, were added to the multiple layers of protective barbed wire ringing the combat base and

the hill outposts in a band 25 meters wide in many places. Marines placed explosives inside rolls of barbed wire to produce boobytraps which, when activated by a tripwire or detonated on command, would send sharp shards of twisted metal flying in every direction. In some places, the defenders emplaced drums of *fougasse*, a mixture of gasoline and diesel fuel detonated by plastic explosive which produced a wall of flame certain to discourage even the most determined attacker. Still there were shortcomings in the Marine defenses. Former *Washington Post* correspondent Peter Braestrup, who served as a Marine officer during the Korean War, remembered that after he visited Khe Sanh at the end of January, 1968, "I saw on main base [that] many perimeter trenches were waist high, no more. Marines don't like to dig."^{3***}

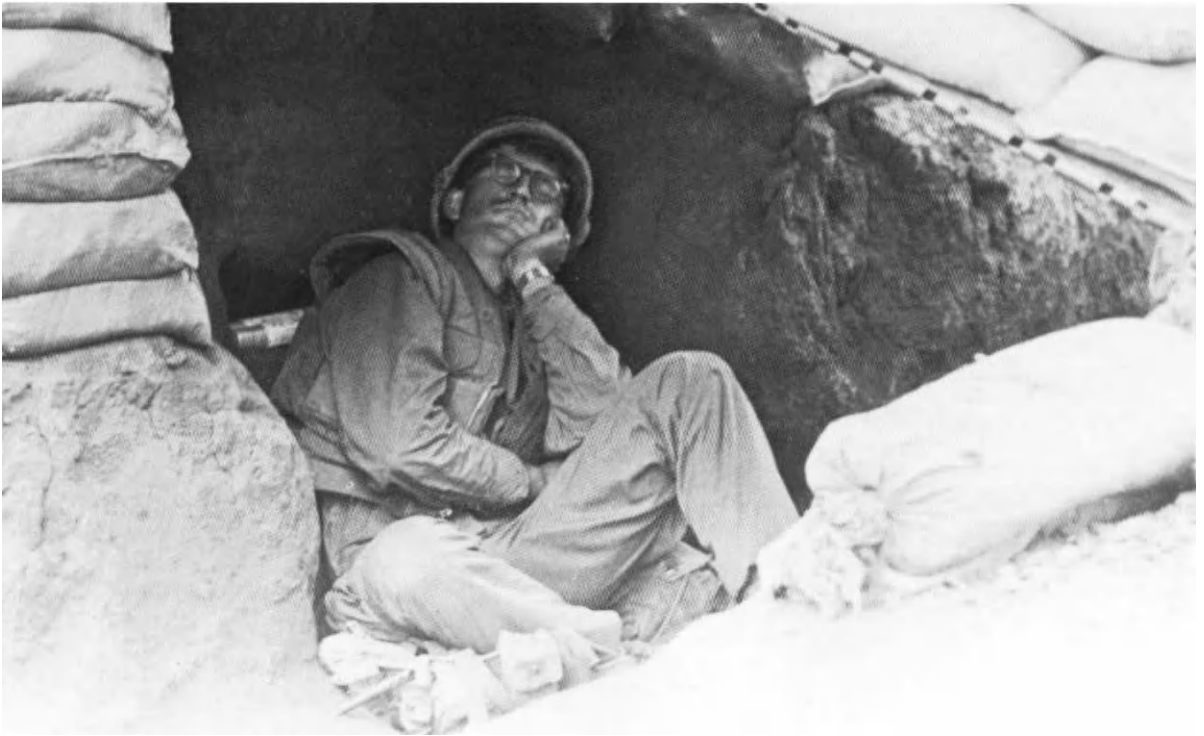
In addition to the physical preparation of the ground at Khe Sanh, higher headquarters entered the picture to assist in the defense of the combat base and its outlying positions. General Westmoreland ordered that Khe Sanh receive maximum support from Boeing B-52 Stratofortress heavy bombers and ordered the 1st Brigade, 101st Airborne Division to prepare to deploy to I Corps Tactical Zone on 24-hour notice. General Cushman directed the 3d Marine Division to shift heavy artillery units for better support of Khe Sanh and requested that the 3d Brigade, 1st Air Cavalry Division be alerted for deployment to the Hue-Phu Bai area on 24-hour notice.⁴

Logistical preparations went forward at the same time. By the third week in January, Khe Sanh had at least a 30-day supply of ammunition for all of its

* A detachment of three 105mm howitzers from Battery C, 1st Battalion, 13th Marines was attached to Company I on Hill 881 South to provide additional fire support for the base. Colonel Kent O. W. Steen, who served with the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines as a young officer in 1968, wrote: "There were times when these three artillery pieces were all that could be brought to bear on attacks on the . . . main base." Col Kent O. W. Steen, Comments on draft, dtd 1Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Steen Comments; 1/13 ComdC, Feb68.

**See Chapter 4 relative to the activities and establishment of these organizations in the Khe Sanh sector.

***For discussion of Marine vulnerabilities at Khe Sanh see Chapter 4. See also LtGen Philip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War, The History: 1946-1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), pp. 554-56; LtCol Frederick J. McEwan, Comments on draft, dtd 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File); and William J. O'Connor, Comments on draft, dtd 29Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter O'Connor Comments. See also the references to Marine shortcomings in building fortifications and bunkers in Chapter 1, especially with reference to comments by Major Gary E. Todd who served on the 3d Marine Division intelligence staff in 1968 and Colonel John C. Studt. Colonel Studt, who as a lieutenant colonel took over the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines at Khe Sanh in March 1968, observed that "the first thing I undertook was a total reconstruction of our defensive positions starting with the company commanders building a proper bunker with me." Col John C. Studt, Comments on draft, dtd 22Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File). From another perspective, Colonel Kent O. W. Steen, an artillery officer at Khe Sanh, commented, "we did homemade bunkers not because we wanted to or didn't know better, but that there weren't enough airlift and construction resources in Vietnam to provide the materials we need once the threat was understood." Steen Comments.



Top is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190273 while the bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190685.

Top, a Marine infantryman takes a brief nap in his covered overhead bunker, protecting him from incoming artillery and mortar rounds. Below, the photograph is an overview of the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines bunker defenses along the western perimeter of the base. The Marines had come under criticism for not "digging in."



howitzers, mortars, and small arms. Even so, Cushman declared that when aircraft became available, he intended to increase those stocks by another five days' supply.⁵

The rallier who surrendered to Captain Kenneth W. Pipes' Company B Marines on 20 January proved to be a gold mine of information.* Lieutenant La Thanh Tonic answered questions freely, providing intelligence officers detailed information concerning the North Vietnamese plan for the attack and reduction of the Khe Sanh Combat Base. Tonic claimed that the Khe Sanh campaign was the most important effort undertaken by the North Vietnamese since the U.S. became involved in the war. Their objective was to seize Quang Tri Province and force the U.S. out of South Vietnam by capturing every U.S. base between the Laotian border and Con Thien. According to La Thanh Tonic, the effort was so important that the North Vietnamese Defense Ministry controlled it directly.⁶

The enemy plan called for a major offensive effort by the North Vietnamese *325C Division*. The *5th Battalion* of the division's *95C Regiment* was to capture Hill 1015, the highest peak of Dong Tri Mountain, which would neutralize the Marine-manned nearby Hill 950. From this high ground overlooking the airfield and its approaches, Communist gunners could interdict aerial supplies and reinforcements. The *6th Battalion, 95C Regiment* was to seize Hill 861. The *4th Battalion, 95C Regiment* had orders to attack the western end of the airstrip, near where, on 2 January, the Marines had killed the North Vietnamese reconnaissance party. The *101D Regiment* was to attack the east end of the airstrip in coordination with the effort by the *4th Battalion, 95C Regiment* at the other side of the combat base. Lieutenant La Thanh Tonic told the interrogators that the North Vietnamese *29th Regiment* was in division reserve, its location unknown to him (it was, in fact, headed for Hue City and the savage battles of the Tet Offensive). The cooperative lieutenant was unable to provide specific information concerning the size, designation, location, or equipment of any NVA artillery units, but he was certain that heavy artillery and rockets would support the attacks. The offensive, he claimed would begin before Tet—only 10 days away.⁷

Opening Moves

Just after 2000 on 20 January, an eight-man Marine reconnaissance team, four kilometers west of Khe Sanh on Hill 689, reported that it was surrounded, under attack, and required artillery support. Lieutenant Colonel John A. Hennelly's 1st Battalion, 13th Marines responded. Through the night, Hennelly's gunners enclosed the reconnaissance team in a protective box of artillery fire, preventing the North Vietnamese from overrunning its position. In all, over 2,200 rounds of friendly artillery fire fell around the trapped Marines, sometimes within 20 meters of them. The technique was effective. Marines reported 25 North Vietnamese casualties, while the patrol sustained only two wounded.^{8**}

Within a few hours, however, the fight on Hill 689 would become a sideshow. Shortly after midnight, two red star cluster signalling flares soared into the darkness above Hill 861, and immediately 300 North Vietnamese fell upon Company K's lines from the northwest. Striking from attack positions within 100 meters of the crest, the enemy blasted holes in the protective wire with bangalore torpedoes and quickly advanced, supported by mortars targeting Company K's bunkers and trenches. The NVA moved up the northwest slope, keeping the crest of the hill between the combat base and their attacking units, thus curtailing the Marines' use of artillery fire in the defense.⁹

Company K, commanded by Captain Norman J. Jasper, Jr., fought back hard as enemy rifle, machine gun, and mortar fire poured into Hill 861, but the North Vietnamese penetrated the 1st Platoon's defenses and overran the company's landing zone. Moving through his company area, directing the defense of the hill, Captain Jasper was wounded three times and unable to carry on. His executive officer, First Lieutenant Jerry N. Saulsbury, took command of Company K in the middle of the fight.

^{**}Lieutenant Colonel Hennelly remembered that his artillery used eight 105mm howitzers "to keep literally a wall of fire" between the Marine patrol and the enemy. The plan had been to extract the men by helicopter, but this proved infeasible because in order to do so the artillery had to stop firing and the North Vietnamese . . . [would have] moved back in. By this time, the entire base was under attack and he recalled that he had the three howitzers firing the east end of the box cease fire and passed the word to the reconnaissance team to move east to the base. Hennelly stated the team arrived safely back about dawn, which he believed was a miracle. LtCol John A. Hennelly, Comments on draft, dtd 30Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Hennelly Comments.

*The details concerning the actual capture of Lieutenant La Thanh Tonic are contained in Chapter 4.



Photo is from the Ted Vdorick Collection

A photo of Hill 869 was taken from the trenchline of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines at the Rock Quarry.

The 3d Battalion command group was still on Hill 881 South, where it had gone earlier in the day to monitor Company I's battle on Hill 881 North.* The weather had closed in during the afternoon, grounding helicopters and effectively trapping Lieutenant Colonel Harry L. Alderman and key members of the battalion staff atop Hill 881 South.

Alderman's operations officer, Major Matthew P. Caulfield, contacted Hill 861 by radio during the fight and learned that Lieutenant Saulsbury had assumed command. Caulfield knew that Saulsbury had recently been dropped from flight training and had no infantry experience. Concerned, Major Caulfield told Saulsbury to rely on the company gunnery sergeant, who was well known in the battalion as an effective and experienced combat leader. "The Gunny is dead," Saulsbury replied. When Caulfield next told Saulsbury to get advice from the company first sergeant, Saulsbury informed him that the first sergeant was in the wreck of the company command post, dying.¹⁰

Lieutenant Saulsbury turned to the task at hand, fighting Company K like a veteran combat commander. The action was close and fierce, with North Vietnamese moving through parts of the position, heaving satchel charges into bunkers. The enemy next pene-

trated the southwest side of 861's perimeter, forcing the 3d Platoon from its positions and occupying the Marines' bunkers. Sergeant Mykle E. Stahl singlehandedly counterattacked, distracting the enemy troops while other Marines recovered casualties. As he advanced up the trenchline, three North Vietnamese attempted to capture him and Stahl suffered a bayonet wound before killing two of them. When his rifle malfunctioned, another Marine killed the third man. Stahl then picked up an enemy AK-47 assault rifle and attacked a third bunker, killing three of the enemy and capturing three others. When the 3d Platoon reoccupied its positions, Stahl, although wounded three times, manned a .50-caliber machine gun and continued to fight.^{11**}

Major Caulfield ordered some of the battalion's 81mm mortars on Hill 881 South to fire in support of Hill 861, ever mindful that the NVA might also attack Hill 881 South at any time. The mortars fired 680 rounds that night, causing the tubes to become so hot that the Marines cooled them first with water, then fruit juice, and finally, by urinating on them.¹²

By 0530, the enemy onslaught had spent itself against the determined defense of Hill 861. Marine signal intelligence personnel reported hearing the

*See Chapter 4.

**For his actions, Sergeant (later Captain) Stahl received the Navy Cross.

commander of the attacking NVA unit ask for reinforcements. But it was too late for that. Company K hit the enemy with a final blast of fire, driving them off the hill.¹³

The battle for Hill 861 left 4 Company K Marines dead and 11 wounded. At daybreak, elements of the company swept the area outside their wire, finding 47 dead North Vietnamese and capturing 3 wounded. One of the prisoners claimed to belong to the *4th Battalion, 95C Regiment*, a slight conflict with Lieutenant La Thanh Ton's revelation of the previous afternoon, but, nonetheless, close enough to lend further credibility to his information.

"Incoming!"

No sooner had the North Vietnamese abandoned their attempt to take Hill 861 than they struck the Khe Sanh combat base itself. At 0530, enemy artillery, mortar, and rocket fire smothered the airstrip and its surrounding bunkers and trenches. The first round landed in the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines area, scoring a direct hit on the generator which powered its digital fire control computer, but the battalion continued to fight back with the fire direction center computing firing data manually.¹⁴

Within minutes of the opening salvo, enemy shells hit the base's ammunition supply point known as "ASP Number 1". More than 1,500 tons of ammunition began exploding, throwing fragments and unexploded rounds, some of them on fire, through the air to land in and around the Marines' fighting positions. Captain Pipes, the commanding officer of Company B, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, moved his command post three times because the explosions continued showering his position with smoldering mortar and artillery projectiles which threatened to detonate at any moment.^{15*}

Incoming rounds smashed into the airstrip, ripping apart the steel plates and damaging helicopters. A direct hit destroyed the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines mess hall and another struck the tiny post exchange. Company D, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines lost all of its personnel records to enemy shell fire. Riot control grenades burned in the inferno at ASP Number 1,

sending choking clouds of "CS" gas rolling through the trenches and bunkers to add to the Marines' misery. Some did not have gas masks and could only cover their faces with wet towels.¹⁶

Lieutenant Colonel Hennelly's artillerymen remained at their howitzers, providing counterbattery fire. In Battery C's position, near the ASP, scores of hot, smoking shells thrown skyward by explosions, fell once more to earth. Captain William J. O'Connor, First Lieutenant William L. Eberhardt, and Sergeant Ronnie D. Whiteknight, all of Battery C, picked up between 75 and 100 of these dangerously hot projectiles and moved them away from the gun pits. Captain O'Connor recalled that one Marine driver abandoned his truck loaded with ammunition "sitting in the middle of my Battery area." At that point, Sergeant Whiteknight "rushed out of a bunker and drove the truck away from the guns and into a less dangerous area." When CS gas rolled over the gun line, Lieutenant Eberhardt and Sergeant Whiteknight brought gas masks to the cannoneers so that Battery C might continue its duel with the North Vietnamese gunners.^{17**}

At 1000, a large quantity of C-4*** and other explosives went up with a tremendous blast, rocking the entire combat base. A shock wave rolled through Khe Sanh, cracking the timbers holding up the roof of the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines command post. The battalion staff fell to the ground but the roof, after settling about one foot, held fast.¹⁸

As the enemy shells continued to fall and ASP Number 1 continued to burn, each new explosion took its toll on the Marines' ammunition supply.¹⁹ Ammunition technicians from Force Logistic Support Group-B fought the flames with fire extinguishers and shovels, but by afternoon the garrison was dangerously low on many types of ammunition. General Cushman's warning of the previous week to "tidy up" ASP Number 1 was driven home. Worse, the logistical air effort to build up ammunition stocks would have to begin again, meaning that other types of supplies would wait even longer for delivery while the priority for space on board planes continued to go to ammunition.

*Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth W. Pipes, the commander of Company B in 1968, remembered that one of the first Marines killed was his radio operator: "I found him slumped over the entrance to our bunker, as I exited to search for him." LtCol Kenneth W. Pipes, Comments on draft, dtd 10Mar95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Pipes Comments, 1995.

**William O'Connor, the Battery C commander, recalled that when he took over the battery, the troops had a dog mascot with the mange. O'Connor related, "despite my orders the dog was not destroyed but was cleaned up. He was smart enough to hide from me, but when we got hit . . . [on 21 January] CS rolled into the area from the exploding dump and I found myself sharing my gas mask with the dog. That dog later left for the States with one of our rotating troops and did make it back safe and sound." O'Connor Comments.

***A plastic explosive.



Photo from the David Douglas Duncan Collection, MCHC

A lone combat boot and helmet are seen among the debris where a Marine's "bootch" stood before it was destroyed when a 122mm rocket hit the nearby ammunition dump.

Nightfall brought no respite for the defenders of Khe Sanh. At 1950, the 2d Platoon, Company L, 3d Battalion reported about 35 North Vietnamese crawling toward its wire near the western end of the airstrip. The Marines opened fire with grenade launchers and light antiarmor weapons (LAAWs).^{*} When the action ended an hour later the North Vietnamese were seen dragging away casualties and 14 enemy dead remained in the wire.²⁰

The fighting and shelling of 21 January resulted in 14 Marines dead and 43 wounded. Combined with the ammunition dump explosions, the shelling destroyed a Bell UH-1 Iroquois helicopter, all of the weather monitoring equipment, most of the airstrip's night lighting system, many field telephone lines, bunkers, engineer equipment, generators, the post exchange, a mess hall, and other facilities.^{21**}

^{*}The M72 Light Antiarmor Weapon (LAAW) is a 66mm anti-tank rocket system in which a projectile is prepackaged in a disposable launcher. In Vietnam, the Marines used these weapons against enemy bunkers and as on this occasion even against infantry.

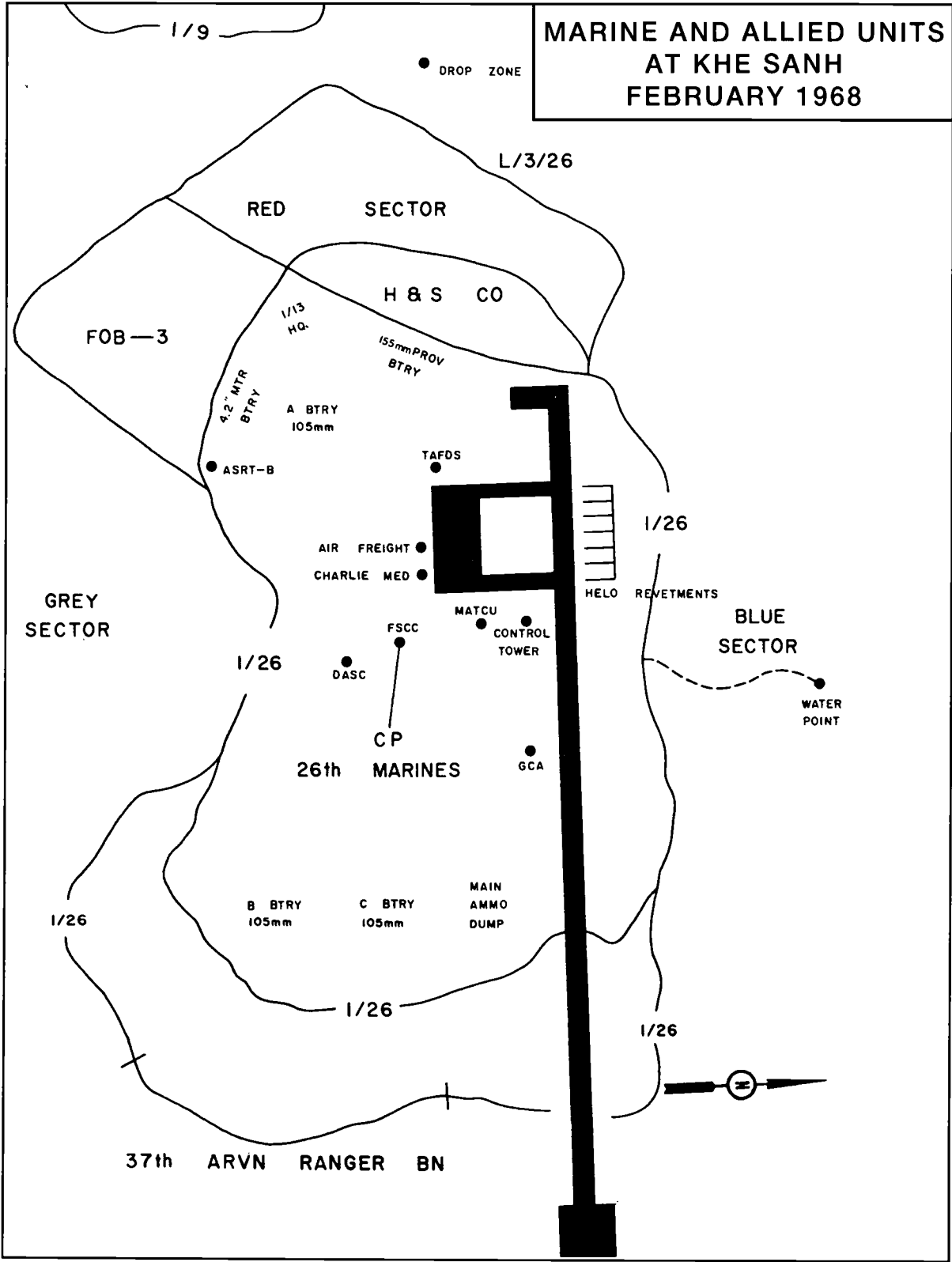
^{**}Colonel William H. Dabney, who as a captain commanded Company I on Hill 881S, recalled that as well as the main base being bombarded, "several rounds of 120mm mortars struck" Hill 881S, wounding several Marines, and that "as they were being evacuated, several more rounds struck the helicopter zone, killing the company copman and two other Marines and destroying a CH-34 helicopter and wounding its crew." Col William H. Dabney, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94] (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Dabney Comments.

III MAF immediately moved to replenish the ammunition lost in ASP Number 1, but the task was complicated by damage to the airstrip. With only 1,800 feet of the 3,900-foot runway open, large-capacity cargo aircraft could not land. Further, the damage to the night lighting system and poor weather added to the problem. Nonetheless, six Fairchild C-123 Provider light cargo aircraft of the 315th Air Commando Wing landed at Khe Sanh after dark on 21 January under artillery illumination, bringing in 26 tons of much needed ammunition. After midnight, a 1st Marine Aircraft Wing Sikorsky CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopter delivered whole blood after an extremely dangerous landing on the "socked-in" airstrip.²²

The Fall of Khe Sanh Village

Almost simultaneously with the attack on the main base, the North Vietnamese launched an assault against the Regional Force troops and Combined Action Oscar units in Khe Sanh Village about 3,000 meters to the south.^{***} Early on the morning of the 21st, under cover

^{***}Marine records state that the attack on Khe Sanh Village occurred at 0630 on the morning of the 21st while Colonel Bruce B. G. Clarke, USA, who was the senior U.S. Army advisor for Huong Hoa District, in an account he wrote in April 1968, states that the NVA attack began at 0500. See 26th Mar ComdC, Jan68, and Capt Bruce Clarke, untitled account, dtd Apr68, attached to Col Bruce B. G. Clarke, Comments on draft, n.d. [Apr95] (Vietnam Comment File).



of fog, elements of the *66th Regiment, 304th North Vietnamese Division* struck the Huong Hoa District headquarters in the village complex. The mixed group of defenders included two platoons of the 915th Regional Force Company, the small four-man U.S. Army advisory group headed by Army Captain Bruce B. G. Clarke, and two Combined Action Platoons of Combined Action Company "Oscar," commanded by Marine First Lieutenant Thomas B. Stamper. The total strength of the allied force consisted of approximately 175 soldiers and Marines. Combined Action Platoon Oscar-1 (CAP O-1) consisting of 10 Marines and 1 Navy corpsman, headed by Sergeant John J. Balanco, and about an equal number of Bru tribesmen, was in the headquarters hamlet. The second Combined Action Platoon, Oscar-2 (CAP O-2), led by Sergeant Roy Harper, at about the same strength, was in a nearby hamlet about 200 yards to the west.

With Captain Clarke and Lieutenant Stamper coordinating artillery and air support from the headquarters command bunker, CAP O-1 and the RF troops stood off the initial attacks in fierce fighting.* While eventually forced to give up most of the hamlet, the two units established a final defensive perimeter in the headquarters compound. CAP O-2 also managed for that first day to stave off the NVA in their sector.

As the fog lifted about midday on the 21st, the intensity of the combat slackened somewhat. While the North Vietnamese continued to place pressure upon the defenders with mortar and RPG bombardments, they limited their infantry action to small arms fire and probes. Helicopters attempted to resupply the embattled headquarters compound, but could not land. According to Corporal Balanco, the crews managed, however, to kick out some much needed ammunition.

*Captain Clarke was on a separate advisory radio net from Lieutenant Stamper. Clarke managed to keep in radio contact with Robert Brewer, the Senior Quang Tri Province Advisor in Quang Tri City, and more importantly established radio contact with an Air Force forward air controller who called in repeated air strikes against the North Vietnamese. Lieutenant Stamper had direct radio contact with the 26th Marines and was able to call in artillery support and Marine air through the Marine radio net. Col Bruce B. G. Clarke, USA, Comments on draft, n.d. [Apr95] (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Clarke Comments; Capt Bruce Clarke, untitled account, dtd Apr68, attached to Clarke Comments. According to Prados and Stubbe, Captain Clarke was out on an early morning patrol just before the enemy onslaught on the 21st, but "miraculously got back to the perimeter and under cover" to help coordinate the defense. John Prados and Ray W. Stubbe, *Valley of Decision, The Siege of Khe Sanh* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1991), p. 258.

Two relief expeditions also failed in their attempts. In the first, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines from the Khe Sanh base sent out a platoon from Company D to the village. The platoon reached Hill 476 overlooking Khe Sanh Village and could see North Vietnamese troops deploying. Receiving new orders that the relief mission was too dangerous, the platoon returned to base. The second expedition was a disaster. The U.S. Army 282d Assault Helicopter Company attempted to bring in that evening the South Vietnamese 256th Regional Force Company from Quang Tri City. Unfortunately, in a series of mishaps and misunderstandings, the aircraft came down in a landing zone near the abandoned French Fort, 2,000 meters east of Khe Sanh, the former home of FOB-3, and now a North Vietnamese stronghold. It was a near slaughter: the North Vietnamese killed over 25 of the American pilots and crew and 70 or more of the RF troops. Among the dead was the expedition leader, U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Seymoe, the deputy advisor for Quang Tri Province. According to authors John Prados and Ray Stubbe, this failed expedition "in terms of proportionate casualties and equipment losses . . . would be the worst military debacle of the entire campaign at Khe Sanh."²³

During the night of 21-22 January in Khe Sanh village, the situation remained tense but relatively quiet, except for some enemy sniper fire. During this time, the Marines and surviving Bru of CAP O-2 to the west, fought their way to the headquarters compound.** The Marines sustained several wounded but no dead. On the morning of the 22d, Sergeant Balanco, who was later awarded the Silver Star for his part in the fight, led a patrol towards the Old French Fort, hoping to find survivors of the aborted relief mission. At the bottom of the hill upon which the fort was situated, Balanco turned back, fearing he was being set up for an ambush after seeing some Vietnamese in strange uniforms. Upon approaching the western sector of the headquarters compound, Balanco and his men recovered what he claimed to be 150 weapons, including RPGs and assault rifles, many of them

**Former Navy Corpsman John R. Roberts, who served with CAP O-2, recalled that Sergeant Harper, although badly wounded, continued to coordinate the defense. Roberts wrote that most of the other Marines in the CAP were also wounded. Despite their wounds, the CAP-2 Marines decided that the only choice they had was to break out and attempt to reach CAP-1 in the headquarters compound, which they successfully did. John R. Roberts, "The Bastard Sons of Khe Sanh, the Marines of CAP, Oscar II," ms, attached to John J. Balanco, Comments on draft, dtd 15Nov94 and 5Apr95 (Vietnam Comment File).

brand new, from the bodies of the “hundreds of mutilated and mangled NVA” there.²⁴

During the late morning of 22 January, a Marine helicopter took Lieutenant Stampler back to the Khe Sanh base to consult with Colonel Lownds about the feasibility of continuing the defense in the village. According to Lownds, upon Stampler’s recommendation and after “long consideration and proper evaluation of the facts,” he decided to evacuate the units.²⁵

The resulting evacuation took place under chaotic conditions including North Vietnamese shelling. Sergeant Balanco remembered, “We received an agonizing radio message . . . from an emphatic and concerned Lt. Stampler telling us to pack up.” According to Balanco, “no R.F.’s or Bru with their ‘weapons’ would be allowed on the helicopters to return to the combat base.” He recalled that six helicopter evacuation missions flew out of the village that day. As the first helicopters took off, a group of frightened Vietnamese civilians rushed to board the aircraft. Balanco fired “a few M-70 rounds” in the opposite direction, causing them to hold back so that the wounded could be taken out first.²⁶

The helicopters took out all of the American wounded including two U.S. Army sergeants from the Advisory Group. Captain Clarke also had received orders from Robert Brewer, the Senior Quang Tri Province Advisor, to evacuate the headquarters. According to Clarke, Brewer had not wanted to abandon Khe Sanh Village, but in that Colonel Lownds could not provide any further artillery support, there was no longer any choice. Clarke and one of his advisory sergeants declined to board the helicopters. They led the remnants of the 195th RF Company and several of the Bru safely to the FOB-3 compound along a secret trail.^{27*}

*There seems to be some doubt whether Colonel Lownds ordered that the RFs and the Brus not be evacuated by helicopter. According to Lownds’ interview, he ordered the evacuation of the Bru CAPs and RFs, but they and Captain Clarke elected to walk out rather than board the helicopters. Col David E. Lownds inrvw, 13Mar68, pp. 22–23, in Khe Sanh: Transcriptions of Oral History, MCHC. Given the accounts on the ground by both Clarke and Sergeant Balanco, it is obvious that the RFs and the Bru would have boarded the helicopters if they had the choice. It may very well have been that Colonel Lownds’ orders may have been misunderstood or that the situation on the ground may have determined the decision not to evacuate them. In any event the relations between the Army advisors and the Marine command with the exception of the CAP Oscar Marines was not very good. Colonel Clarke later wrote: “It was so bad that the Marines were eavesdropping on our radio nets . . . In this regard, I had coordinated to have my own alternate communications back to Quang Tri.” Clarke Comments.



Photo courtesy of John J. Balanco
Cpl Bruce Brown, LCpl Frank Batchman, and Sgt John J. Balanco, members of Combined Action Company Oscar who served with the Bru Montagnards in the Khe Sanh village complex, are seen at the secretive Forward Operating Base (FOB) 3, next to the Khe Sanh base, where they set up new positions with their Bru Popular Force troops.

Sergeant Balanco departed on the last helicopter to leave the headquarters compound. Just before he boarded the aircraft, two civilian Bru approached him carrying a badly burned man and asked the Marine to take him on board. At the same time, the pilot was shouting: “No one except Americans could go on the LAST CHOPPER OUT and he was departing RIGHT NOW!” Taking out his pistol and thinking to put the wounded man out of his misery, Balanco suddenly changed his mind. He returned the pistol to his holster and “screamed for everyone to move back and got him on that last chopper out.” After arriving at the Khe Sanh base, the Marines of Combined Action Company Oscar, including CAP-3 which also evacuated its hamlet located north of the headquarters, joined the RF troops and the Popular Force Bru at the southern edge of the FOB-3 compound.^{28**}

Reinforcement and Fighting Back

On 22 January, Khe Sanh Combat Base was the scene of frenetic activity. The resupply effort continued as 20 Air Force C-123 sorties delivered another

**Captain Clarke later that afternoon led a Special Forces Strike Force from FOB-3 which destroyed everything of value in the Khe Sanh Village headquarters. Clarke Comments and Balanco, “Abandoned,” p. 186.



Photo from the Abel Collection

An Air Force C-123 Provider transport is about to land just beyond the leveled ammunition dump at Khe Sanh, bringing in much-needed supplies.

130 tons of ammunition. After unloading, the empty aircraft joined the helicopters of Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 362 in evacuating wounded Marines and civilian refugees. Attack aircraft of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, as well as Navy and Air Force planes, struck known and suspected Communist positions in the surrounding area. The North Vietnamese did not remain silent. Artillery, rockets, mortar, and small arms fire pounded the base and hill positions at intervals throughout the day, playing havoc with efforts to repair damage. Enemy fire hit one CH-46 helicopter as it was lifting off from the airstrip, causing it to crash within the perimeter.²⁹

At 1200 on the 22d, the 3d Marine Division ordered Lieutenant Colonel John F. Mitchell's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines to deploy to Khe Sanh.* Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell recalled that his battalion command group and two rifle companies arrived by helicopter that day. Mitchell remembered that as the helicopters landed the battalion was greeted by

"a hail of automatic weapons fire followed by mortar fire" and the unit sustained its first casualties at Khe Sanh. According to the battalion commander, there were no guides and he directed his company commanders "to disperse their companies as best they could, seek protective cover or trenches, and await further orders." Then Mitchell sought out Colonel Lownds in the 26th Marines command post. The 26th Marines commander told Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell to assemble his troops and "be prepared for immediate deployment due west" of the Khe Sanh base. At Mitchell's request, given the lateness of the hour, Colonel Lownds agreed that Mitchell could wait until the following day to deploy to his new sector.³⁰

The next morning, the battalion moved out from the combat base and spent much of the time in "clearing/reconnoitering the area west/southwest" of the combat base. Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell selected a small hill that fronted a rock quarry approximately 1,500 meters to the west southwest of the main base for his command post and main defensive area. Mitchell then sent the 1st Platoon of Company A about 500 meters outside the battalion perimeter on an

*See Chapter six for the redeployment of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines from Camp Evans.

even smaller hill to set up an outpost on a knoll west of the quarry, which he designated Alpha 1.* His priority at both sites was the building of his defensive positions starting “from scratch.” While “building materials, wire, and mines” arrived from the main base as they “became available,” the battalion first depended upon its own “ingenuity and hard work—digging—scrounging, . . . to survive the incoming.”

Over the next several days, Khe Sanh maintained a high level of activity, as helicopters and cargo aircraft flew in and out as often as the weather permitted, and Marines worked to improve their defensive positions. On 23 January, enemy antiaircraft fire became a significant threat, with NVA gunners downing a helicopter and a jet attack aircraft in a 20-minute period.³¹

Communist shelling continued, completely destroying the base post office and further damaging bunkers, trenches, and the airstrip.³² The Marines fought back, expending massive quantities of artillery and mortar ammunition in attempts to silence the enemy guns. This, however, proved to be a difficult task. The enemy gun positions were well-concealed in dense jungle, visible only when actually firing. Because these positions were usually located on the reverse slopes of hills, they were often not even visible from Marine positions. Air observers of the 3d Marine Division maintained constant patrol over the area during daylight hours, providing some of the information the Marines needed to return fire effectively.^{33**}

*Bert Mullins who served as a radioman to Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell recalled that after leaving the main base that they actually reached first the small hill which later became A-1. He remembered Mitchell “remarking that we must be on the wrong hill because it was much too small.” Bert Mullins, Comments on draft, dtd 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Mullins Comments. Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell stated that he ordered the establishment of the A-1 outpost because he believed that the NVA would need more than one avenue of approach to make an all-out assault on the main base and that A-1 lay “astride the west to east axis” to Khe Sanh. Moreover, he needed “as much warning as possible before the enemy would reach 1/9’s MLR [main line of resistance].” Col John F. Mitchell, Comments on draft, dtd 5Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Mitchell Comments.

**Navy Captain Bernard D. Cole, who as a lieutenant junior grade and naval gunfire officer assigned to the 26th Marines, served as an assistant target intelligence officer in the 26th Marines Fire Support Coordinating Center. He recalled that “air dropped sensors were a primary source of targeting data for us.” These sensors “were still classified . . . and we were not supposed to refer to them as an info[r]mation source . . .” Cole remembered that “we received a formatted readout from the sensors . . . [which] would indicate the sensor location and type, and the type of target (troops or vehicles) and the approximate number . . .” Capt Bernard D. Cole, USN, Comments on draft, dtd 27Oct94 and 23Jun96 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Cole Comments.

Enemy long-range artillery presented an even more difficult problem. The accepted view was that the artillerymen fired their large guns from positions on Co Roc Mountain, a precipitous cliff southwest of the combat base, across the Laotian border and outside the maximum range of the artillery pieces of the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines. One 3d Marine Division intelligence officer, Major Gary E. Todd, wrote that the reports he read stated that “NVA artillery was dug into the eastern face of Co Roc so as to be almost impossible to hit with counter-battery fire, even if we had the artillery with range.” These same sources reported that the NVA gun emplacements were in “man-made caves, completely camouflaged, and fitted out with rails similar to railroad tracks.” The North Vietnamese gunners “would roll their guns to the mouth of the cave and, with barrel protruding, fire, then roll back smoothly into the cave and restore the camouflage.” Navy Lieutenant Junior Grade Bernard D. Cole, attached to the 26th Marines as the assistant target intelligence officer, remembered that he “personally targeted Arc Light strikes (which came in flights of three B-52s) on Co Roc.” According to Cole, “The strikes would quiet down the NVA gunners for a couple of hours—from the shock . . ., but then they would resume firing.”³⁴

Captain William H. Dabney, who commanded Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines on Hill 881 South had a different perspective. According to Dabney, “Co Roc was a myth, perhaps because of the imposing look of the mountain and the romantic sounding name.” While granting that some rounds were fired from artillery at Co Roc, he argued that the more destructive NVA firing positions were located to the west of Hill 881 South. Dabney contended that being seven kilometers west of Khe Sanh and 1,500 feet higher than the Marines on the base, his company was in a better position to locate the enemy artillery positions. While not always hearing the guns being fired, he declared, “we could usually hear the rounds going over.”³⁵

He described how one of his artillery spotters, Corporal Molimao Niutoa, a native Samoan and blessed with unusually good eyesight, using powerful ships’ binoculars, found several of these enemy guns to the west. Because of the location of Hill 881 and its height, the Khe Sanh DASC often passed off aircraft with unexpended munitions to Company I. As Dabney explained, the Khe Sanh DASC “rarely could see targets of opportunity” and “we, conversely, *always* [emphasis in the original] had targets.” On one such occasion, according to the Marine captain, he just had



Photo is from the Ted Vdorick Collection

A lone Marine can be seen standing up along the trenchline of Company D, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, located in the Rock Quarry about 1,500 meters west of the main base. Note the sandbags along the trenchline.

The American flag flies over the command bunker of Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines on Hill 881 South, one of the main hill outposts. Captain William H. Dabney, the Company I commander, who had the colors raised every morning, argued that his company was in one of the best positions to locate the enemy guns.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191078



several flights of "Navy and Air Force birds handed off" to him when Corporal Niuatoa suddenly "spotted a flash and then several others." A few seconds later, the Marines on the hill heard the rounds going overhead and then saw them impacting on the main base. This time, Dabney contacted a Marine airborne forward air controller codenamed Southern Oscar flying a Cessna light single-engine fixed-wing O-1E. Turning over control of the aircraft given to him to Southern Oscar, Captain Dabney described to the airborne controller the nature of the target and relayed to him Corporal Niuatoa's directions. When Southern Oscar had one of the aircraft drop his bombs on a ridgeline and ask for an adjustment, Dabney recalled the corporal's response: "Left a click, add two ridge lines." Given these new bearings, the air controller spotted first one gun and then several others. While not sure because of enemy antiaircraft fire, Southern Oscar believed that the resulting airstrikes took out four of the guns. Dabney wanted to call in B-52 strikes on these positions, but declared that one of his everlasting frustrations was that nothing ever came of his recommendations.^{36*}

*In his comments, Colonel Dabney wrote: "For what it's worth, the folks in the Khe Sanh COC [Combat Operations Center] never realized how the NVA artillery was emplaced and employed, but then, they never came up to [Hill] 881S and looked." He believed that they were unnecessarily fixated upon Co Roc. Although respecting the abilities and brilliance of Captain Mirza M. Baig, the 26th Marines Target Intelligence Officer, Dabney believed the latter too engrossed in his "technological acquisition goodies" and "forgot he had . . . eyeballs working for him." In supporting his viewpoint, Colonel Dabney asked why would the North Vietnamese employ their Russian-made 130mm guns with a 27,000 meter range from Co Roc which was only 12,000 meters from Khe Sanh and risk losing them. He observed that Hill 881 South was three to four miles off the gun target line from Co Roc, and "if we could *hear* [emphasis in the original] the rounds whistling over, they couldn't be coming from Co Roc!" Instead, he believed the main enemy guns were located about five kilometers north of Co Roc and about 15,000 meters west of Hill 881 South. Instead of emplacing them in battery positions, they placed individual guns "along the gun-target line, about 500 meters apart, since the target (Khe Sanh) was fixed, they had only to adjust each gun for range based on its location. Deflection was a constant." He concluded: "It made sense, really, to put their artillery, guns firing at extreme range . . . to the west, where they could fire down the long axis of the target. That way, 'over and shorts' still had effect on target." Dabney Comments. Captain Bernard D. Cole, USN, after reading Colonel Dabney's comments, wrote: "I do not dispute that Col Dabney was able to spot arty firing at Khe Sanh from positions other than Co Roc, but I certainly disagree that 'Co Roc was a myth.' We obviously knew about and targeted non-Co Roc arty, which we located through 'all source' intelligence—although Harry Baig regularly went out to the perimeter (without helmet or flak jacket!), our job in the FSCC was of course not observation but fire support coordination. I simply think that Col Dabney is basing his conclusion on inadequate information." Captain Cole also insisted that "If anyone called in a viable Arclight target, we would hit it . . ." Cole Comments, dtd 23Jun96.

While there may have been some question about the location of the enemy guns, there was little dispute that enemy rockets, especially the 122mm Soviet type, posed possibly an even greater threat to the Khe Sanh base. Used in great volume and difficult to suppress, the enemy gunners fired them from west of the base which offered "the long axis of the base" as a target. Given the limited range of the missiles, Hill 881 South was in a strategic position. From the hill, the Marines of Company I could observe the NVA gunners shoot off their rockets, usually in sheaves of 50 rockets firing simultaneously towards Khe Sanh. This permitted Dabney to give the main base about a 10-second warning to sound the alarm and for the Marines there to take cover. While unable to suppress the rockets when they fired because of their sheer volume, Dabney's Marines were able to take counter-measures. According to the Company I commander, the North Vietnamese regularly used the same sites over and over so he employed his mortars and 106mm Recoilless Rifles against them "at night while they were setting up sometimes producing secondary explosions." The Marines also called in air strikes against the sites, but with mixed results because of the weather.³⁷

An ominous indication of an even more extensive North Vietnamese campaign against the Marine base occurred in mid-January. On the morning of the 24th, Communist tanks overran the BV-33 Battalion, Royal Lao Army, at Ban Houaysan, an abandoned airfield on Route 9, just across the border in Laos. The appearance of NVA tanks outside North Vietnam was extremely unusual. Later the same day, an air observer reported sighting a MiG aircraft 10 to 15 miles west of Khe Sanh.

Closer to home, the 3d Platoon, Company F, 26th Marines engaged an NVA company only one kilometer north of the battalion's position on Hill 558. The Communist troops were equipped with helmets and flak jackets and used whistle signals. They were not afraid to leave their positions to maneuver, at one point sending 50 men against the Marines' flank. The Marines reported that the enemy fought tenaciously, refusing to withdraw even after "four hours of pounding" by artillery and aircraft. One North Vietnamese machine gunner remained at his post until killed by rifle fire at a range of only five meters.³⁸

In light of the major battle anticipated at Khe Sanh, General Westmoreland requested that Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Lam, the I Corps com-



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801114

ARVN Rangers occupy a defensive trench east of the runway and actually just outside the main base. The American command wanted a Vietnamese unit to participate in Khe Sanh for "psychological" reasons as well as military.

mander, provide South Vietnamese units to participate in the defense of the combat base, citing "psychological reasons as well as military." Lam agreed, and on 27 January, Captain Hoang Pho and his ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion arrived at the combat base and took their place at the east end of the runway just forward of Company B, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, actually outside of the base defensive perimeter. According to one source, Colonel Lownds wanted "to gain more elbow room . . . to push out the perimeter" since he had received implied criticism from his superiors about the limited extent of his defenses in this sector.³⁹ Although their unit, 318 men strong, was about 100 short of its authorization, these tough, disciplined soldiers would prove themselves time and again during the battle, earning the respect of the Marines.⁴⁰

Enemy sappers were at work, apparently preparing the way for planned ground attacks. Marines on the perimeter found barbed wire cut, but replaced to

look as if it were whole, and Claymore mines* turned around to face Marine trenches.⁴¹ Intelligence reports from higher headquarters warned Colonel Lownds to be watchful for signs of NVA tunneling. The Marines monitored seismic intrusion detectors, drove metal engineer stakes into the ground and listened to them with stethoscopes borrowed from the medical unit, and even employed divining rods. They dug a number of "countermines" in response to possible indications of tunneling, but found no enemy tunnels.⁴²

Beyond Marine positions, American aircraft opened a new era in warfare, planting unattended ground sensors near likely enemy avenues of approach and assembly areas.** These devices were extremely sensitive and could monitor sound or vibrations, transmitting their information by radio to intelligence personnel. The position of each sensor was carefully recorded, permitting the Marines to quantify unusual enemy activity. By noting the activation of a number of different sensors, intelligence personnel could estimate the size and composition of an enemy unit, as well as its direction of march and speed. The devices would play a key role in the battle.^{43***}

Round Two

By the end of January, intelligence officers painted a frightening picture of the magnitude of the North Vietnamese effort around Khe Sanh. Reacting to developments, Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins, the commanding general of the 3d Marine Division, ordered Lownds to limit patrolling to within 500 meters of friendly lines. Tompkins feared that the North Vietnamese wanted to draw the Marines out into the open, away from the protection of their bunkers, trenches, mines, and barbed wire. Patrolling, he reasoned, was unnecessary because intelligence was

* A directional anti-personnel mine emplaced above ground facing the enemy.

** According to Colonel Dabney, he observed that these sensors were planted "by black, unmarked, 'Air America' [a CIA sponsored aviation company] birds which looked to me to be B-26s." Dabney Comments.

*** Colonel John F. Mitchell, who in 1968 commanded the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines at Khe Sanh, commented that the 26th Marines provided him in early February with a "black box" that monitored sensors along Route 9. He observed that "it was very productive." His battalion S-2 or intelligence officer listened in on the NVA radio nets in conjunction with the sensor monitoring and "the raw intelligence gleamed . . . was put to good use throughout the siege." Mitchell Comments.

providing accurate information on enemy unit locations and activities.^{44*}

Tet Mau Chanh, by far the most significant and celebrated holiday season in Vietnamese culture, approached. During some previous holiday periods, both sides had agreed to temporary cease-fires which were observed more often in the breach. In 1968, the Tet cease-fire was scheduled for the period from 1800, 29 January until 0600, 31 January. At 1100, 29 January the command post of the 37th ARVN Ranger Battalion received a radio message in a "northern accent" stating that the NVA had an ARVN Ranger patrol in sight, but would not fire because of Tet. The voice advised the Rangers to recall their patrols until after the holidays. The ARVN unit changed radio frequencies.⁴⁵ Later that day, the 3d Marine Division notified Khe Sanh that the Tet truce was canceled. One unit history recorded that "as if to signal that they also heard the news the NVA dropped six 60mm mortar rounds into the Combat Base at precisely 311800 January."^{46**}

With the truce cancellation, the massive air campaign under Operation Niagara continued unabated. On 30 January, B-52s carried out the biggest strike of the war to that date against targets in the Khe Sanh area, dropping 1,125 tons of bombs.^{47***}

* This limitation on patrolling did not apply to all of the forces at Khe Sanh. The members of FOB-3, the Studies and Observation Group (SOG), with their attached Montagnards continued to run their clandestine operations. Navy Captain Bernard D. Cole, who served in the 26th Marines FSCC, recalled that Colonel Lownds "had a small map room separate from the main FSCC Hq. When he took proposed B-52 strikes for approval, a Special Forces captain there plotted the progress of long-range patrols into Laos." Cole Comments. Former Marine Sergeant John A. Balanco who served with CAP O-2 at FOB-3 recalled: "Black helicopters would land with no markings on them and take men dressed in civilian clothes away." He mentioned that Captain Clarke and the mixed group with him also patrolled and the CAP Oscar Marines occasionally joined them. Balanco, "Abandoned," pp. 185-91. Colonel Mitchell stated that he did not adhere to the 500-meter limit either and that "1/9 patrolled every day of the week" north, south, and west of his positions, "up to 1,200 meters or more." He mentioned that he and FOB-3 were the only commands that patrolled daily and that he and the FOB-3 commander "devised a coordinated plan for patrolling and intelligence gathering." It was his opinion "that you must have maneuverability to complement fire power and to keep your enemy having doubts about your intentions." Mitchell Comments.

** Both the North Vietnamese and the allied forces at Khe Sanh routinely monitored each others' radio nets. Colonel Mitchell with the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines commented that by monitoring the enemy nets, it was apparent that the North Vietnamese had "complete knowledge of the . . . T/O and T/E of the Marine units at Khe Sanh," including the "names of key commanders." Mitchell Comments.

*** For further discussion of Operation Niagara see Chapter 23.

The troop and logistics buildup at Khe Sanh, as well as the massive air support effort, indicated the resolve of U.S. forces to defend the base. Commanders and officials at every level, including the President, expressed concern for the situation in northwest Quang Tri Province. President Johnson, in particular, was sometimes depicted as having had a fixation with Khe Sanh. Indeed, an enduring legend of the campaign concerns an incident in which the President supposedly asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to sign a letter to the effect that they believed Khe Sanh could be defended. In truth, President Johnson asked for General Westmoreland's personal assessment of the situation, which was then circulated among the Service chiefs for comment. The Joint Chiefs of Staff unanimously endorsed Westmoreland's conclusion that Khe Sanh could and should be held.⁴⁸

Perhaps the most dramatic indication of the President's concern was his question to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earle G. Wheeler, about the feasibility of using tactical nuclear weapons to resolve the battle on favorable terms. Westmoreland established a "small secret study group" to examine the consequences of what was nicknamed Operation "Fracture Jaw." The group reported that "because the region around Khe Sanh was virtually uninhabited, civilian casualties would be minimal." Although planning never proceeded beyond this stage, the President's interest in the possibility of such a drastic step underscored his perception of the seriousness of the situation at Khe Sanh.⁴⁹

Bru refugees streamed into Khe Sanh seeking evacuation from the war-ravaged area. They told the Marines that the North Vietnamese claimed they would "liberate the Khe Sanh airstrip" by 5 February. Indeed, on the night of 3-4 February, sensors northwest of Hill 881 South detected the movement of 1,500 to 2,000 people. Captain Mirza "Harry" M. Baig, Colonel Lownds' Target Intelligence Officer, initially believed the movement to be a North Vietnamese resupply effort and passed the information to fire support units for their attack. On the following night, however, the massed movement continued and further study caused Baig to change his opinion. He now thought the sensors had detected a North Vietnamese regiment in attack formation.⁵⁰

The 1st Battalion, 13th Marines, joined by four batteries of Army 175mm guns to the east, pounded the area indicated by Baig with volley after volley of artillery fire. The dreadful hammering had a telling effect. The sensors transmitted the rumble



Photo from the David Douglas Duncan Collection, MCHC

MajGen Rathvon McC. Tompkins, the CG, 3d MarDiv, is seen as a passenger with an unidentified crew member in a Marine helicopter on one of his frequent visits to the Khe Sanh base.

of impacting shells, as well as the voices of hundreds of panic-stricken men running to escape the deadly barrage.

Just to the east of the target area, the men of Captain Earle G. Breeding's Company E, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines watched the scene from a hilltop position just 500 meters northeast of Company K's strongpoint on Hill 861. Company E had occupied the hill (dubbed "861A") that morning, 5 February, because it blocked direct observation between Hill 861 and the 2d Battalion strongpoint on Hill 558. There were no sensors near Hill 861 or 861A.⁵¹

At 0300, about two hours after the Marine and Army artillerymen shelled the suspected North Vietnamese regiment, the combat base came under Communist rocket, artillery, and mortar fire. Five minutes later, Captain Breeding reported that 200 North Vietnamese were breaching the wire atop Hill 861A and Colonel Lownds immediately set a "Red Alert" for the 26th Marines.⁵²

Smoke from a B-52 massive Arcflight airstrike rises in the background as photographed from FOB-3. During Operation Niagara, the Boeing Stratofortress long-range bombers based at Guam and Thailand conducted hundreds of these strikes in support of the Marines at Khe Sanh.

Photo courtesy of John J. Balanco



Intense mortar and small arms fire rained down on Company E from the attacking NVA even as the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines poured on a heavy answering barrage. Communist sappers blasted holes in the protective barbed wire through which following infantry advanced, shooting as they came. Company E, having occupied the hill only a few hours before, was not well-entrenched. Still, the Marines used every weapon they could bring to bear, including CS gas grenades, against the oncoming North Vietnamese.⁵³

The enemy troops pressed their attack vigorously, reaching and penetrating the 1st Platoon's perimeter. First Lieutenant Donald E. R. Shanley and his platoon withdrew in good order to alternate positions from which they continued the fight. Meanwhile, friendly artillery rolled back and forth over the slope upon which the North Vietnamese were attacking, seeking to cut off any following reinforcements. Aircraft joined

in, dropping their loads under radar control accomplished by the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing's Air Support Radar Team (ASRT) B of Marine Air Support Squadron (MASS) 3 at the combat base.

Shortly after the North Vietnamese penetration, at 0500, Lieutenant Shanley led his men from their fighting holes in a bold counterattack. The 1st Platoon fell upon the enemy with knives, bayonets, rifle butts, and fists. Captain Breeding later described the scene as "just like a World War II movie . . . Charlie didn't know how to cope with it . . . we just walked all over him."⁵⁴ The North Vietnamese who survived the counterattack fled the hilltop, then regrouped and attacked again, halfheartedly. The Marines quickly repulsed the discouraged enemy.

While the fight for Hill 861A cost Company E, 7 dead and 24 wounded, a company sweep at dawn revealed over a 100 enemy dead on the slope of the hill

President Lyndon B. Johnson confers with U.S. Army Gen Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Joint Chiefs concurred with Gen Westmoreland's assessment that Khe Sanh could be successfully defended

Photo Courtesy of Center of Military History

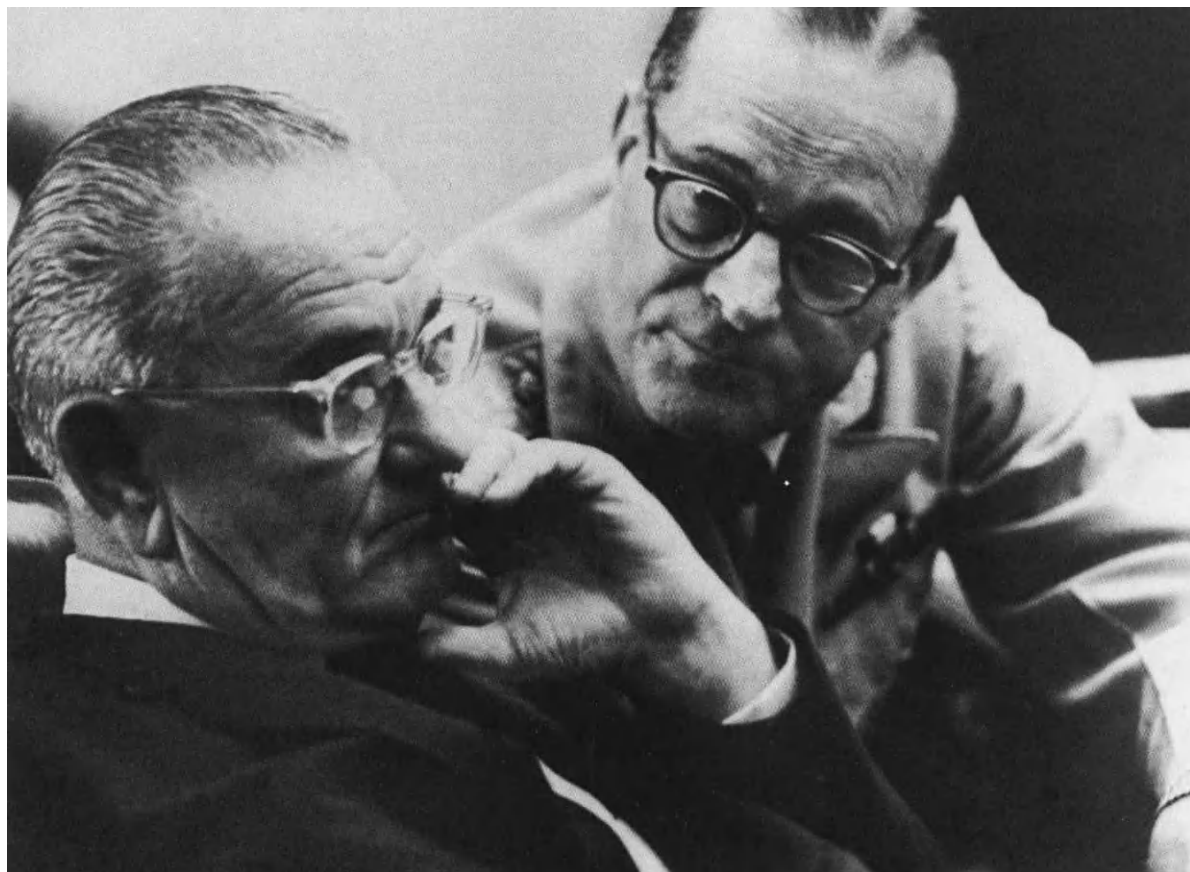




Photo from the David Douglas Duncan Collection, MCHC

A Marine sniper team on Hill 861A from Company E, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines goes into action. On the left is LCpl Albert Miranda with his Remington 700 sniper rifle, taking aim at a distant target, while his partner, in the center, LCpl David Burdwell, points out the enemy soldier to his platoon commander, Second Lieutenant Alec J. Bodenweiser, with the binoculars.

and within the perimeter. Captain Baig later speculated that the heavy and accurate artillery fire (almost 2,000 rounds from the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines alone) on and behind the assaulting Communists had prevented their reserves from joining the attack.⁵⁵

The Fall of Lang Vei

Having failed to capture first Hill 861, then its neighbor 861A, the North Vietnamese turned their attention elsewhere. Their next target was the new Lang Vei Special Forces Camp, defended by Detachment A-101, Company C, 5th Special Forces Group and four CIDG companies of Bru Montagnards.

Lang Vei was a heavily fortified position on Route 9 about two kilometers from the Laotian border from which Detachment A-101 ran patrols to monitor North Vietnamese infiltration into Quang Tri Province. About a kilometer closer to Khe Sanh was the village of Lang Vei, site of the old Special Forces

camp. Here, the survivors of the Royal Lao BV-33 Battalion, overrun by North Vietnamese tanks at Ban Houaysan a few days before, rested with thousands of civilian refugees, including their own families.⁵⁶

The many missions assigned to the 26th Marines for the Khe Sanh battle included responsibility for providing fire support for Lang Vei and for reinforcing the camp should the enemy attack it. Lieutenant Colonel Hennelly sent a 1st Battalion, 13th Marines forward observer to the camp on 6 January to register defensive fires. A month earlier, Colonel Lownds sent a company from Khe Sanh to Lang Vei to rehearse the reinforcement plan. It stayed off the road under the assumption that the enemy would set ambushes along Route 9 as part of an attack on Lang Vei. Because of the heavy jungle, the company took 19 hours to cover the nine-kilometer distance.⁵⁷

At 0030, 7 February, the North Vietnamese struck the Lang Vei camp. In the first engagement between



Both photos are from the David Douglas Duncan Collection

Top, Capt Earle G. Breeding, Commander of Company E, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines, with cigar in his right hand and radio in his left, reports the successful counterattack of his company against the enemy on Hill 861A. Below, two Marines of Company E repair the unit's barbed wire after its successful defense of Hill 861A. The body of one of the attackers is in the foreground.



American troops and enemy tanks since the Korean War, 12 Soviet-built PT-76 light amphibious tanks of the 202d Armor Regiment, followed closely by infantry from the 304th Division, crashed through the chain link fence surrounding the compound and rolled through the camp shooting. The defenders destroyed a number of the tanks with 106mm recoilless rifle fire, but to no avail. In a desperate and hard-fought action, the enemy overwhelmed Detachment A-101 and the Bru CIDG companies. Survivors remained in bunkers, among them the detachment commander, Army Captain Frank Willoughby, a former Marine noncommissioned officer.⁵⁸

From his underground combat operations center (COC), Willoughby called for air and artillery support. The 1st Battalion, 13th Marines responded to Willoughby's request with repeated missions, firing the brand-new, top-secret controlled fragmentation munitions (COFRAM), colloquially known as "Fire-cracker," for the first time in combat.* Overhead, Marine and Air Force attack aircraft tried to follow Willoughby's directions in the darkness to drop their bombs on enemy concentrations in and around the camp.⁵⁹

For most of the night, Willoughby and a few other survivors remained in the COC bunker with an enemy tank on top of them, firing, while the North Vietnamese rolled countless fragmentation and gas grenades into the bunker and called to the soldiers in English to surrender. Willoughby remained in radio contact with the 5th Special Forces Group in Da Nang which requested that the 26th Marines execute

the previously arranged contingency plan for the reinforcement of Lang Vei. Colonel Lownds refused, reporting that the combat base itself was even then being heavily shelled and that he expected an enemy assault against the airstrip at any time. Further, the difficulty of moving through the difficult terrain to Lang Vei at night with enemy tanks on Route 9 made reinforcement, in the words of one Marine staff officer, "suicidal."⁶⁰

Generals Westmoreland, Cushman, and Tompkins accepted Lownds' decision. Westmoreland later wrote, "honoring the prerogative of the field commander on the scene, I declined to intervene until I could ascertain more on the situation." During the late morning of 7 February at Da Nang, General Westmoreland met with General Cushman and other senior commanders in I Corps. While the conference dealt with the situation throughout I Corps, General Westmoreland expressed his concern about the Lang Vei situation. Among the participants at the meeting were Army Colonel Jonathan F. Ladd, the commander of the 5th Special Forces Group, who had just flown from Khe Sanh to Da Nang, and Army Lieutenant Colonel

Bru civilian refugees, including many children, walk toward Ca Lu along Route 9 after the fall of Lang Vei. Not having the resources to care for them and fearing the possibility of enemy infiltrators, the Marines decided against allowing the refugees into the Khe Sanh base.

Photo from the 3d MarDiv ComdC, Feb68



* A projectile containing a number of "submunitions" or bomblets, which are ejected from the shell and spread over a wide area, each bomblet exploding like a small grenade. It is considerably more lethal than the standard high explosive projectile. This ammunition is still in use today under the name Improved Conventional Munitions (ICM). Lieutenant Colonel John A. Hennelly who commanded the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines recalled that sometime earlier an Army brigadier general and warrant officer "flew into Khe Sanh with some 105mm cofram and a hand-written set of firing tables for the new ammo." From his understanding, "it sounded like COFRAM would be good against troops in the open on terrain without much vegetation." Hennelly stated that when "things hit the fan" and the Special Forces required artillery support, he would have preferred "HE [high explosive] rounds" with variable or time fuzes. He, however, received orders to use the COFRAM, "The orders were coming from Washington, D.C. (honest to Pete)." Hennelly stated that "we fired a mission or two with Cofram but it was not the time or situation to be messing around with a new ammo. It was slowing the fire missions down." He directed that they switch back to conventional ammunition and "that's primarily what we fired although I was telling folks up-the-line we were using cofram." Hennelly Comments.

Daniel L. Baldwin, III, the northern SOG commander. Ladd strongly advocated that a relief force be sent immediately to relieve or evacuate the survivors. Lieutenant Colonel Baldwin recommended that the Special Forces troops at FOB-3 conduct a helicopter-supported evacuation of the camp. After much discussion and some recrimination, General Westmoreland ordered General Cushman to provide helicopter and fixed-wing support to Baldwin.^{61*}

By this time, however, the defenders were largely dependent upon their own efforts. Individually and sometimes in groups, the Special Forces and Bru CIDG troops broke out of the camp and most made their way to Lang Vei Village where the Royal Laotian BV-33 Battalion still remained. Special Forces personnel with the battalion in the old camp there attempted to encourage and plead with the Laotians to assist their comrades in the new camp, but the results were only a few feeble and begrudging counterattacks.

* Colonel Ladd, the 5th Special Forces Commander, in an oral history several years later described his activities and participation in the 7 February meeting. He declared that he had been at Lang Vei up to the night before the camp had been hit, and that the Special Forces there "could hear the tanks moving around." Ladd departed by helicopter to obtain anti-tank mines and assistance. According to Ladd, he talked to General Cushman at Da Nang who wanted to help him, but the people in Saigon did not believe that there were tanks there and that the Special Forces "didn't need" the mines. He then flew back over Lang Vei the following morning and saw tanks sitting on top of the base. According to his account, he then went to Khe Sanh and asked Colonel Lownds to mount a relief expedition which Lownds refused to do. Ladd then flew back to Da Nang and found General Westmoreland there. According to the Special Forces colonel, he then told Westmoreland there were three choices: "Stay there and hold; abandon the place; or the Marines reinforce." Frustrated at the meeting, Ladd declared he then called General Abrams, stating: "I just can't get Westmoreland's attention long enough to do anything. He is just putting it off." Ladd claimed that it was General Abrams who called General Norman Anderson, the Marine 1st MAW commander and ordered him to provide aircraft support for an evacuation. Col Jonathan F. Ladd, USA (ret) intvw, n.d. [1977?] (U.S. Army, Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa), pp. 22-30, attached to Clarke Comments, hereafter Ladd Intvw. The discussions at the meeting of 7 February were wide ranging and involved the situation at Da Nang as well as at Lang Vei (See Chapter Eight). Many of the participants at the meeting had very different perceptions of what occurred. General Westmoreland later wrote that he was "shocked at things that virtually begged to be done . . ." Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports*, p. 342. On the other hand, both General Cushman and General Earl E. Anderson, Cushman's chief of staff, remembered no acrimony at the meeting. Cushman Intvw, Nov82, p. 29 and Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). Marine Brigadier General John R. Chaisson, however, who headed the MACV Combat Operations Center, in a letter soon after the meeting, wrote about "recriminations between the Green Berets and the Marines." BGen John R. Chaisson ltr to his wife, dtd 8Feb68 (Chaisson Papers, Hoover Institute).

Shortly after 1700, under strong air cover from fixed-wing aircraft and helicopter gunships, Marine CH-46s helilifted the relief force from FOB-3 into old Lang Vei. Despite some mobbing by Laotian and some of the Vietnamese troops, the helicopters brought out most of the Americans and the most seriously wounded of the Laotians and Vietnamese troops. The rest made their way to Khe Sanh on foot. The loss of life was heavy for the Special Forces and CIDG troops at "new" Lang Vei. Almost 300 of the camp's 487 defenders were killed, wounded, or missing, including 10 Americans killed and missing, and another 13 wounded from a total of 24.⁶²

Of the debacle and its aftermath, General Cushman later said:

The base was overrun in the middle of the night, in a matter of a couple of hours. . . . The garrison had already been defeated. There was nothing one could do really, to salvage the situation. . . . it would have been a grave risk to send Marines from Khe Sanh to Lang Vei in the hours of darkness.^{63**}

The destruction of Lang Vei created a secondary problem for Colonel Lownds. More than 6,000 refugees, many of them Laotians of the BV-33 Battalion and their families, as well as a number of Vietnamese Special Forces and Bru CIDG personnel who had escaped Lang Vei alive, crowded outside the gates of the combat base. Lownds refused to admit them

** Most Marines agreed with General Cushman and would accept the statement of Navy Chaplain Ray W. Stubbe, who has written and researched extensively on the subject of Khe Sanh, that an entire NVA regiment "waited to ambush any rescue force." LCDr Ray W. Stubbe, USN, Comments on draft, dtd 23Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File). Major Gary E. Todd, who served as an intelligence officer on the 3d Marine Division staff during this period, supported this view in his comments that Bru refugees "had seen what amounted to an NVA regiment lying in ambush between KSCB [Khe Sanh Combat Base] and Lang Vei that night during the attack." Maj Gary E. Todd, Comments on draft, dtd 28Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File). One Marine exception to the contention that a relief expedition was infeasible that night was Colonel John F. Mitchell, who commanded the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, at the time, the unit slated to carry out the Marine contingency plan for the relief of Lang Vei. Colonel Mitchell commented that at the end of January Colonel Lownds assigned him the Lang Vei relief mission. According to Mitchell, the plan at that time called for the battalion to make the relief overland. The battalion commander suggested to Colonel Lownds that "the only successful way to accomplish this mission, would be by Helo Assault." At that point, Lownds answered, "Hell you would lose one-half your force and helicopters during the landing." While not taking exception to Colonel Lownds projection, Mitchell replied, "Yes, but I would be there." Colonel Mitchell still contends: "In my opinion the Marines should have done the 'right thing' by sending a relief unit." Mitchell Comments, dtd 9Feb96.

because he did not have the resources to care for them and because he feared that the crowd might conceal enemy infiltrators. But neither could he allow them to remain outside the wire for fear that the enemy might use them to shield an attack on the perimeter.

On the afternoon of 7 February, General Tompkins issued guidance for dealing with the refugees in the event the NVA attempted to use them to screen an attack. First, the Marines were to use CS gas in an attempt to disperse the crowd. If that failed, they would fire over their heads. If the North Vietnamese continued to push the refugees in front of an attack, Tompkins authorized the garrison to shoot into the crowd.⁶⁴ To preclude such a disastrous occurrence, Lownds arranged to move the refugees about two kilometers from the perimeter for the night. Some were eventually processed and flown out, but most simply walked away, down Route 9 to the east.*

The Intensifying Battle

Fresh from their first major success of the Khe Sanh campaign, the Communist forces moved quickly against their next objective. During the night follow-

ing the Lang Vei battle, three companies of the 101D Regiment moved into attack positions near the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines.

About 500 meters west of the battalion's perimeter, Second Lieutenant Terence R. Roach, Jr., and Company A's 1st Platoon, occupied "Alpha 1," named after the platoon's designation. With added machine gun teams, forward observers, and corpsmen, Lieutenant Roach's reinforced platoon numbered 66 men. The outpost provided an extra measure of security for the battalion through its ability to detect and report enemy activity well forward of the lines.

The Alpha 1 outpost was a well-prepared defensive position. The hill itself was quite steep on all but the northwest slope. It was ringed by multiple layers of barbed wire on the slopes and, at the crest, a trench network which included a number of sandbagged bunkers.⁶⁵

At 0415 8 February, in heavy fog and near-total darkness, the North Vietnamese struck the outpost, laying down a heavy and accurate mortar barrage that covered the hilltop for three to four minutes. Enemy infantry followed close on the heels of the mortar fire, attacking from the northwest.

The North Vietnamese assault troops threw canvas over the outpost's protective barbed wire and rolled over it. Almost immediately, enemy soldiers swarmed into the inner perimeter. Lieutenant Roach tried to stem the breakthrough almost singlehandedly, killing several of the enemy with his rifle and attempting to rally the troops on the perimeter. While able to pull one of the badly wounded Marines to relative safety, he died in a hail of automatic weapons fire. The enemy had successfully captured half of the hilltop, while the remnants of the platoon attempted to regroup, especially in the southeastern portion of the outpost.⁶⁶

While the defenders of the Alpha 1 outpost fought desperate hand-to-hand encounters in the trenchlines, sometimes swinging entrenching tools or five-gallon water cans, the rest of the battalion endured persistent and heavy shelling, apparently intended by the NVA to prevent the dispatch of reinforcements. Nonetheless, the battalion's mortar crews braved the incoming rounds to fire in support of Alpha 1.

On the hill, about 30 Marine survivors gathered in the southern portion of the trench network and used sandbags to wall off their part of the trench from the enemy. Some of their weapons were damaged or destroyed, ammunition was scarce, and many of the men were wounded. The North Vietnamese did not rush them, but instead contented themselves with

*The situation with the refugees especially with the Bru exacerbated the already strained relationships between the Army Special Force troops and the Marine command at Khe Sanh. The Special Force units believed that the Bru who had served with them faithfully and well were being misused. Colonel Ladd stated in an interview several years later that when the Bru arrived at the Khe Sanh base they were stripped of their weapons and turned back. According to Ladd, the Marines at the base said, "they couldn't trust any gooks in their damn camp." Ladd Intvw. Both Army Colonel Bruce B. G. Clarke, who had been at Khe Sanh Village and later brought his forces to FOB-3 and former Marine Sergeant John J. Balanco CAP O-2 also at FOB-3 wrote of the suspicion that they received. As a CAP Marine, Balanco identified very closely with the Bru with whom he served and stated that he felt very isolated after the CAPs were "not allowed on the base with our fighting Bru!" While at FOB-3, he noticed that the Marine tanks at Khe Sanh had their guns trained on FOB-3. Balanco, "Abandoned," pp. 185-91. Colonel Clarke noted that at FOB-3, "We often took more fire from behind than from the NVA to our front." Clarke observed that the basic difficulty at Khe Sanh was "that there was no unity of command in the AO [Area of Operations], a lack of communication and coordination and misunderstanding of the interrelated destiny that would be ours." Clarke Comments. In relationship to unity of command, Colonel Lownds was in a difficult situation. As one Marine officer, Colonel William H. Dabney, who at the time commanded Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines on Hill 881S, observed the Special Forces had their own command channels separate from the Marines and were not under Colonel Lownds' operational control. From the Marine perspective, the Special Forces including the FOB-3 troops, "were so secretive and so independent that they were impossible to coordinate as part of a larger battle. . . . Special units do not belong near a pitched battle. They only inhibit fire support and get in the way." Dabney Comments.

showering great numbers of grenades on the Marines. One survivor later recounted, "...they continued throwing 25 or 30 grenades every 4 or 5 minutes. It was unbelievable how many . . . grenades they had actually transported into battle."⁶⁷

At 0740, the commanding officer of Company A, Captain Henry J. M. Radcliffe, gathered up his 2d Platoon and went to the rescue of the outpost. The relief force fought its way to the base of the hill in 25 minutes. There, Radcliffe directed an air strike on the North Vietnamese, then led his Marines in a frontal assault which forced the enemy off the hill and directly into the fire of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. Companies B and D joined the 106mm recoilless rifles and a tank in cutting down the retreating enemy troops. By 1100, the battle was over and the charred and blasted remains of the outpost were again in Marine hands.^{68*}

Alpha 1 Marines had paid a high price. Worse than the utter destruction of their position, casualties numbered 24 dead and 27 wounded. Over 150 North Vietnamese bodies littered the hill and many more may have died. Additionally, the Marines captured much enemy equipment, including 13 machine guns, an indication that the North Vietnamese fled the battlefield in disorder.⁶⁹

Although the hill was once more under friendly control and evidence suggested that the Communist forces had suffered a defeat, Colonel Lownds ordered the outpost abandoned. Captain Radcliffe and his men withdrew to the battalion perimeter.

In the four days from 5 February through 8 February, the North Vietnamese launched three major assaults on positions in the Khe Sanh complex, succeeding only at Lang Vei. The battles for Hill 861A and the Alpha 1 outpost, though desperate and bloody for the Marines, had ended as stinging defeats for the Communist forces. The second round was over.

Apparently still smarting from heavy casualties suffered in their assaults on the outlying positions, the Communist forces tried a new approach. They stopped attempting to seize the outposts and increased their attentions to the combat base itself.

North Vietnamese trenches reached toward the eastern end of the airstrip, growing at the astonishing speed of several hundred meters in a single night.⁷⁰

One Marine recorded that, "we watched with some fascination and no small apprehension, day by day, as the trenches crept closer and closer to our perimeter."⁷¹ Some of the enemy trenchlines stretched 2,000 meters from assembly areas to within 35 meters of the Marines' perimeter.⁷²

The Marines tried a number of tactics to discourage the enemy's digging. Aircraft attacked the trenches with rockets, 2,000-pound bombs, and "napalm baths," a scheme in which they dropped a number of unfused napalm tanks on the target which were then ignited by rocket or cannon fire from following planes. Despite the Marines' best efforts, however, the digging continued apace.^{73**} At the same time, North Vietnamese gunners kept up their program of daily firing on the base, especially during periods when fog or clouds reduced visibility and hampered U.S. air operations, thereby helping to conceal the enemy guns.⁷⁴

Throughout the siege, the base remained totally dependent upon air-delivered supplies, which fact the North Vietnamese were obviously aware. Enemy anti-aircraft guns appeared in the hills surrounding the airstrip, forcing cargo aircraft to run a gauntlet of fire both on their approach to and their retirement from Khe Sanh. Aircraft attempting to land prompted an avalanche of incoming fire seemingly from every weapon, of every caliber, which the North Vietnamese could bring to bear on the airstrip. The destruction on 10 February of a Marine KC-130 dramatized on television the vulnerability of the air link to Khe Sanh.^{75***}

The incredible firepower the Marines marshalled to defend Khe Sanh scarred the countryside so that it looked, in General Tompkins words, "like pictures of the surface of the moon, in that it was cratered and pocked and blasted."⁷⁵ Aircraft and howitzers pounded the surrounding countryside with unrelenting ferocity, treating the NVA to a steady diet of attacks. A diverse and highly developed targeting system supported this process, using input from air observers, sensors, signal intelligence, agents, prisoners, ralliers, refugees, and

^{*}Colonel Mitchell, nevertheless, claimed that his 1st Battalion, 9th Marines attained some success against the enemy's digging efforts. He stated that he ordered his Company D commander to send out units from fire team to platoon, before the fog lifted, to destroy or collapse the enemy tunnels. He also stepped up patrols to 400 meters "to ensure the beginning of tunnel activity." According to Mitchell, his intelligence officer who monitored the NVA radio nets, heard "discontinue tunneling activities in the 1/9 sector as it is non-productive." Mitchell Comments.

^{***}See Chapter 23 for the detailed account relative to the air supply of the Marine base.

^{*}Colonel Mitchell, the battalion commander, stated that he had wanted to launch the relief mission earlier, but did not receive permission until 0730. Mitchell also explained that he had one tank attached to his battalion, but would move the tank every night. This way the enemy would know "1/9 had a tank capability, but he wouldn't know how many." Mitchell Comments.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190852

Two Marine forward observers lying on top of a bunker train high-powered binoculars on enemy trenchlines in an attempt to locate NVA mortars. Another Marine can be seen resting inside the bunker.

special operations units, as well as information provided by the Marines manning the defenses of Khe Sanh. In one instance, the 26th Marines scheduled a special air and artillery strike in reaction to a report concerning a "force-wide meeting" of enemy commanders and their staffs in a schoolhouse on the Laotian border. Twenty minutes after the scheduled start time of the meeting, 2 Grumman A-6 Intruders and 4 McDonnell-Douglas F-4 Phantoms dropped 152 500-pound bombs followed by 8 artillery batteries firing 350 rounds into an area large enough "to take in the hangers-on and other idlers who usually congregate around large staffs."⁷⁶

Near the end of February, the intensity of enemy shelling increased even further, reaching a crescendo on the 23d, when according to an official count, 1,307 rounds of artillery, rocket, and mortar fire slammed into the base, killing 12 and wounding 51.* A chance hit on Ammunition Supply Point Number 3 caused secondary explosions which consumed over 1,600 rounds of 90mm and 106mm ammunition.⁷⁷

*Colonel Dabney doubted the accuracy of this official count, making the point that "when you are getting that many rounds, nobody is fool enough to sit around and count them." Dabney Comments. On the other hand, Captain Cole related that "the FSCC made a serious attempt to count incoming rounds—and . . . Jack Hennelly [Lieutenant Colonel John A. Hennelly, commander of the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines] was very conservative about this, so if 1,307 was too exact, it probably was not too far off the mark." Cole Comments, dtd 23Jun96.

On 25 February, Second Lieutenant Donald Jacques led the 3d Platoon, Company B, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines through the perimeter wire of the combat base and headed south on a short-range patrol as part of the regiment's effort to gather information on enemy activity close to the base. About a kilometer south of the base, the patrol spotted three North Vietnamese near the road leading to Khe Sanh Village and gave chase. Just south of the road, the Marines ran into an ambush. A company-sized enemy unit occupying a bunker complex allowed the platoon to advance to within point-blank range before opening fire and driving the Marines to cover.⁷⁸

The platoon attempted to maneuver, but under the intense enemy fire, casualties mounted rapidly. Jacques ordered a withdrawal while the company commander, Captain Pipes, sent another platoon to assist. Second Lieutenant Peter W. Weiss led the 1st Platoon through the gaps in the perimeter wire and headed for the scene of the ambush. About 300 meters from the beleaguered 3d Platoon, Weiss and his men received enemy machine gun fire from 20 meters to their front, forcing them to the ground.^{79*}

** According to George W. Jayne, who was a fireteam leader with the 1st Platoon, his squad received the bulk of the enemy's first burst of fire, killing both the squad leader and Navy corpsman. George W. Jayne, Comments on draft, dtd 1Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Department of Defense Photo (USMC) A190594

Large clouds of dust and smoke obscure part of the Khe Sanh combat base after an enemy rocket and artillery bombardment. On 23 February another Marine ammunition supply point took a direct hit, which resulted in several secondary explosions

With both platoons still under extremely heavy close-range fire, the Marines at the combat base attempted to provide supporting fire from tanks, heavy machine guns, and 106mm recoilless rifles, but fog and the proximity of friendly and enemy forces hampered their efforts. To add to the confusion, the North Vietnamese entered Company B's radio net, possibly using a radio captured from one of the 3d Platoon's destroyed squads, compounding communication problems in the critical situation.⁸⁰

Several survivors from the 3d Platoon filtered back to the 1st Platoon. Lieutenant Weiss ordered his men to gather the wounded and withdraw. The 3d Platoon was a shambles. Lieutenant Jacques was severely wounded, and most of his men were either wounded, dead, or missing. The 81mm mortar forward observer, a Blackfoot Indian corporal named Gilbert Wall, threw Lieutenant Jacques over his shoulder and carried him, with his radio, back to the perimeter, adjusting mortar fire missions all the way

back. The lieutenant, however, was hit in both femoral arteries and bled to death even as Wall carried him.^{81*}

For what had started out as a platoon patrol, the casualties were staggering: 6 killed in action, 17 wounded, and 25 missing.^{82**} No enemy casualties could be confirmed. On 27 February, Colonel Lownds issued further restrictions on patrolling,

*Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth W. Pipes, who commanded Company B at Khe Sanh, observed that Lieutenant Jacques was one of his strongest platoon leaders. His platoon had occupied one of the key defensive positions at the base and Jacques' men had ambushed an NVA reconnaissance unit in late December 1967. Pipes remarked that all the leaders of this platoon including the squad leaders were killed in this action—in front and leading their men. According to Pipes, "the extent of the NVA entrenchments and fortifications were not as evident until the tragic action . . ." Pipes Comments, 1995.

**One of the Marines listed as killed in action was Sergeant Ronald L. Ridgway, who turned out to have been captured by the North Vietnamese and released in March 1973 after the Paris Agreement of January 1973.

limiting it to that which was "necessary to insure the security of . . . defensive obstacles and local security elements."⁸³

Apparently buoyed by their success against the ill-fated Marine patrol, the North Vietnamese once more tried their hands at penetrating the combat base perimeter. During the night of 28–29 February, sappers prepared the ground to the front of the ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion, cutting holes in the wire, and removing mines and trip flares. Their activity went undetected until the next morning.⁸⁴

The following night at 2130, in heavy fog, a battalion of the North Vietnamese *66th Regiment, 304th Division* struck the ARVN positions. Unknown to the enemy, electronic sensors had silently heralded their impending attack and by the time the first waves of assault troops rushed the wire, two B–52 strikes, diverted from other targets, were on the way. The 1st Battalion, 13th Marines, accompanied by the Army's 175mm guns and radar-directed attack aircraft, pounded the North Vietnamese infantry with telling effect. The B–52s saturated the area to the rear of the assault waves with tons of high explosive bombs, devastating what the sensors indicated was a second enemy battalion moving forward to attack.⁸⁵

Once again, the weight of U.S. fire support wrecked the enemy's efforts. The Rangers reported that the North Vietnamese left 7 dead in the perimeter wire, but a search the following morning revealed 71 more with many bangalore torpedoes and satchel charges. Of the carnage, one account read,

... the dead were still huddled in trenches, many in the kneeling position, in three successive platoon lines, as if they had been caught in the assault position. The devastating effect of the firecracker round was apparent.⁸⁶

The only friendly casualty was a single wounded Ranger.

For the remainder of the Khe Sanh battle, the enemy concentrated most of his efforts against the ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion, attacking its position seven times during March, including another battalion-sized assault on the 18th. Although North Vietnamese sappers breached the wire during one of these attacks, the Rangers repulsed every attempt, with the assistance of supporting fires from the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines and attack aircraft.⁸⁷ In addition to these assaults, the North Vietnamese employed psychological warfare against

the ARVN, using loudspeaker broadcasts enticing them to defect.^{88*}

At the beginning of March, III MAF began planning Operation Pegasus, a major effort to reopen Route 9 from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh. In the meantime, air delivered supplies remained the order of the day.^{**} The monsoon ended in March, greatly easing the weather problems which had earlier plagued air operations in the area.⁸⁹ Antiaircraft fire and incoming rounds on the airstrip, however, remained a problem. The first day of the month, mortar fire struck a C–123 as it landed, destroying the aircraft.⁹⁰ On 6 March, enemy gunners downed another C–123 about five miles east of Khe Sanh, killing 43 Marines, a sailor, and the crew of 4.^{***} Only one and a half hours later, incoming fire damaged and grounded another C–123 attempting to take off. This aircraft remained at Khe Sanh awaiting repairs, where it was hit once more on the 17th and destroyed.⁹¹ Helicopters suffered as well, with two Boeing CH–46 Sea Knights and a Bell UH–1 Iroquois falling to enemy gunners during the month.⁹²

In early March, North Vietnamese propaganda teams entered Montagnard villages, announcing that the final, major attack on Khe Sanh Combat Base would soon begin. But, by the middle of the month, the theme had changed to "Ho Chi Minh would be unhappy if they [the NVA] wasted their time on only 6,000 Marines at Khe Sanh!"⁹³ At the same time, U.S. intelligence sources reported that the North Vietnamese *325C Division* was relocating to Laos and the *304th Division* was withdrawing to the southwest.⁹⁴

*Former Marine Bert Mullins, who served with the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines at Khe Sanh, observed that the NVA also employed psychological war techniques against the Americans as well. He recalled leaflets fired by North Vietnamese artillery that urged American troops to surrender. Mullins Comments.

**While supplies were adequate for very basic needs and no one starved, Navy Captain Bernard D. Cole recalled that food was in "relatively short supply during the 'siege.'" He remembered that he received just "two C–ration meals per day . . ." Cole stated that this was an "observation, not a complaint: obviously, the troops in the trenches had higher priority than those of us sitting on our butts in the relative safety of the FSCC!" Cole Comments. Colonel Kent O. W. Steen, a former artillery officer at Khe Sanh, wrote that the priority for resupply was upon ammunition and "at times, we were down to one C–Ration per day . . ." He observed that the "uncomfortable-tired-dirty-stressed souls at Khe Sanh were quite hungry for the most part." Steen comments.

***This aircraft is variously reported as either a C–123 or a C–130. Air Force records indicate the former. Nalty, *Air Power*, p. 46; 3d MarDiv COC msg to III MAF COC, dtd 7Mar68, in III MAF Khe Sanh Ops File.

Despite these indications that the battle was drawing to a close, the North Vietnamese continued pounding the Marines with artillery fire. On 22 March, over 1,000 rounds fell on the combat base and hill positions. Once again, a hit on ASP Number 1 resulted in several hours of secondary explosions and a fire which destroyed more than 900 rounds of artillery ammunition, almost 3,000 rounds of antitank ammunition, and lesser quantities of fuzes, demolition kits, and other assorted items. The enemy bombardment continued the following day with even more shells striking the Marine base.⁹⁵

The enemy had far from given up the fight. On 24 March, Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines engaged two North Vietnamese platoons for over four hours. The contact resulted in 5 Marines killed and 6 wounded, a UH-1 helicopter gunship downed, and 31 dead North Vietnamese.⁹⁶ Two days later, a small-unit patrol* from Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines encountered a North Vietnamese company entrenched on a small hill that the battalion used as a daylight observation post, about 200 meters west of its perimeter. According to the Marine forward observer with the patrol, Larry J. Seavy-Cioffi, they walked into "a well-entrenched NVA company, 15 feet from the top" Seavy-Cioffi recalled that the patrol point man spotted an enemy soldier "adjusting his helmet otherwise we would have been walking dead right into their laps." The patrol withdrew under heavy fire and called for fire support. Company B reinforced the patrol and the Marines finally retook the hill. According to Marine documents, the North Vietnamese lost 26 men and Company B suffered 3 dead and 15 wounded. Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell later wrote: "This was the closest penetration by a company size NVA to 1/9's defensive perimeter, and never happened again during the siege."⁹⁷

Settling the Score

Since the fateful patrol of 25 February, the men of Company B, 1st Battalion, 26th Marines had a score to settle with the North Vietnamese. On 30 March, they got their chance in what one report termed "the first

planned . . . attack of a known enemy position in the battle for Khe Sanh Combat Base." Lieutenant Colonel Frederick J. McEwan, who relieved Lieutenant Colonel James B. Wilkinson as the battalion commander on 15 March, recalled that he and his operations officer, Major Charles E. Davis III, planned the attack "with careful attention to every detail." With the assistance of the battalion artillery officer and air officer, they especially laid out the projected fire support to box the enemy troops in and to prevent the NVA from reinforcing. Morning fog and low air cover, however, forestalled the effective use of air and made the attack even more dependent upon its artillery arm.⁹⁸

In the early morning hours, under cover of fog and darkness, Captain Kenneth W. Pipes led Company B through the perimeter wire and into attack positions 300 meters south of the combat base. As the company deployed for the attack in a line along the enemy's left flank, the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines began preparation fires to soften the enemy positions. By noon, the cannoneers would fire over 2,600 rounds in support of Company B.⁹⁹

At 0755, the company launched its assault behind a rolling barrage fired by nine batteries of artillery, including heavy artillery firing from near the Rockpile. The 2d Platoon under First Lieutenant John W. Dillon seized the first objective, an NVA trenchline, near the lower slopes of Hill 471. From there, the platoon laid down a base of fire while the Company B command group and the other two platoons passed through and attacked toward the second objective, an NVA bunker complex near where the earlier patrol had been ambushed.¹⁰⁰

The Marines advanced through the bunker complex with fixed bayonets, grenades, flamethrowers, and anti-tank rockets, and in the words of one account, "killing all NVA in sight."¹⁰¹ Engineers followed the infantry, setting demolition charges to destroy the larger bunkers. According to Major Davis, "the only serious glitch occurred when the NVA came up on the conduct of fire net and called for a cease-fire." Davis declared that before the battalion was able to get "the fire turned back on," enemy mortars opened up on the attacking Marines and "inflicted most of the casualties." Among the wounded was Captain Pipes, who still retained command. One Marine in the 3d Platoon, Wayne Morrison, who later was awarded the Silver Star, as was the captain, remembered that Pipes, carrying two radios with his right arm and with a wound in his left shoulder, came up behind him and said "we were going to have to attack because we were pinned down."¹⁰²

*There is some question about the size of this patrol. The official reports indicate a platoon, while both Colonel Mitchell and his radioman, Bert Mullins, state that it was a reinforced squad. Larry J. Seavy-Cioffi, who was an artillery forward observer with Company B, stated that he was on that patrol and it consisted of no more than six men, including himself. See Mitchell Comments, Mullins Comments, and Larry J. Seavy-Cioffi, Comments on draft, dtd 12Dec94 and 29Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).

The initial Marine attack, nevertheless had stalled. Captain Pipes recalled that his command group had been "decimated." Among the dead was his artillery forward observer First Lieutenant Marion H. "Hank" Norman, who died in his arms and assisted in the preparation of the firing plans. Lieutenant Dillon brought up the 2d Platoon and "covered the ordered withdrawal back to the base."¹⁰³

The North Vietnamese bunker complex was a flaming ruin, but the Marines had failed to locate the remains of the men killed in the February ambush.* Casualties on both sides had been heavy. The Marines claimed to have killed 115 of the enemy and intercepted enemy messages indicating that the NVA unit, later identified as the *8th Battalion, 66th Regiment, 304th Division*, sustained grievous losses. Company B, however, had not gone unscathed: it suffered 10 dead, 100 wounded and 2 missing. One Marine artillery officer later wondered if the raid to try to bring back the bodies had been worth the additional bloodshed: "No matter whether you get the bodies back at that point or not, you still [had] left your bodies out there." He argued at that point "getting the bodies simply wasn't that important." Nevertheless, as Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, the FMFPac commander who happened to have witnessed the Company B attack, later wrote, the attack served to signal "that the siege was ended." It may not have been over as yet, but it was indicative that the Marines on the ground had started to bring the fight to the NVA and a new phase was about to begin.¹⁰⁴

On the day following Company B's raid, Operation Scotland ended, giving way to Operation Pegasus. Elements of the *101D Regiment* still remained in the area, possibly to cover the withdrawal of their comrades. Although the official enemy casualty count for Operation Scotland totalled 1,602 dead, 7 prisoners, and 2 ralliers, intelligence estimates placed the death toll in the neighborhood of 10,000 to 15,000.¹⁰⁵

The allies had applied an incredible amount of firepower upon the North Vietnamese. Tactical aircraft and B-52s flew 24,449 sorties in support of Khe Sanh, dropping 103,500 tons of ordnance. The artillerymen of the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines and the 2d Battalion, 94th Field Artillery fired 102,660 rounds of various calibers at enemy positions.¹⁰⁶

The North Vietnamese, in turn, fired 10,908 rounds of artillery, mortars, and rockets into U.S. positions in and around Khe Sanh. This fire, com-

bined with small-unit action from Operation Scotland, beginning on 1 November 1967, caused the deaths of 205 defenders of Khe Sanh. Another 1,668 fell wounded, about half of them serious enough to require evacuation.^{107*}

Operation Pegasus

While in March the garrison of the Khe Sanh Combat Base remained in the grip of strong North Vietnamese forces, the allies had already taken initial steps to lift the siege. During Operation Scotland, the defenders had endured daily pounding by enemy artillery, mortar, and rocket fire, as well as frequent probes which kept alive the threat of a massive ground assault. Route 9, the only practical overland route to Khe Sanh from the east, was impassable due to its poor state of repair and the presence of enemy units. Supplies continued to reach the combat base by air, but the massive logistical effort strained the already thinly stretched supply of transport aircraft available in Vietnam. Intelligence officers at General Tompkins' 3d Marine Division headquarters noted reports from prisoners, ralliers, and agents that the North Vietnamese were moving missiles into the DMZ and northern Quang Tri Province for use against Con Thien and Khe Sanh. It was obvious the American command could not permit this situation to continue for much longer.^{108**}

On 2 March, General Cushman met in Da Nang with his subordinate commanders and, with General Abrams present, approved the initial concept to open Route 9 and relieve Khe Sanh. The following week, in a meeting on 10 March, also at Da Nang, General Westmoreland, in turn, agreed to the concept of operations for the relief of Khe Sanh, now codenamed Operation Pegasus. Among the members of this conference was Army Lieutenant General William B. Rosson, the commander of the newly created Provi-

* U.S. casualty figures for Operation Scotland are sometimes questioned as being too low. The casualty reporting system listed only those casualties suffered by the unit (and its attachments) responsible for a given operation. Other casualties incurred in an operational area, by air crews flying in support, for instance, were usually reported by the parent unit. For example, some of the 43 men killed in the C-123 crash of 6 March are not included in Operation Scotland figures because they were members of the aircrew and others were Marines who had not yet reported to the 26th Marines.

** Prados and Stubbe quote Captain Dabney about the possible firing of a Soviet FROG (Free Rocket Over Ground) missile, but found no other evidence of the NVA employing ground to ground missiles during the Khe Sanh campaign. Prados and Stubbe, *Valley of Decision*, p. 392.

* The remains were recovered a few days later.

sional Corps or Prov Corps.* While a subordinate command of III MAF, Prov Corps included the 1st Air Cavalry Division, 101st Airborne Division, and 3d Marine Division and was responsible for all operations in northern I Corps. General Rosson assigned to Major General John J. Tolson, the commander of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, the responsibility for the detailed planning of the operation in coordination with the 3d Marine Division. Rosson also placed under the operational control of the 1st Air Cavalry Division the 1st Marines, the 11th Engineers, and a Seabee battalion.¹⁰⁹

According to the concept of operations for Pegasus, the 1st Air Cavalry Division together with the 1st Marines would deploy from positions near Hue to a new base to be specially constructed at Ca Lu, 16 kilometers east of Khe Sanh. Capitalizing on its air mobility, the Army division would advance along the axis of Route 9. Engineers would follow, repairing culverts and bridges to make the road passable to vehicles. The South Vietnamese promised an ARVN airborne task force of three battalions to participate in the operation. D-day was set for 1 April 1968.

Preparations began immediately. The 11th Engineer Battalion and Naval Mobile Construction (Seabee) Battalion 5 joined the 1st Air Cavalry Division engineers in building the base at Ca Lu, to be called "Landing Zone Stud." The project included bunkers, supply storage facilities, and an airstrip capable of handling Fairchild C-123 Provider cargo aircraft. At the same time, the 1st Air Cavalry Division completed the detailed plans for the attack westward and the 3d Marine Division scheduled a deception operation designed to divert the enemy's attention from Khe Sanh to Dong Ha. The 1st Marines at Phu Bai began "extensive retraining and rehabilitation" as a recuperative measure following its participation in the battle for Hue City.^{110**}

The 1st Air Cavalry Division began preparing the battlefield on 26 March when Lieutenant Colonel Richard W. Diller's 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry began helicopterborne reconnaissance patrols in ever-widening arcs from LZ Stud. Diller's squadron located and targeted NVA positions, and prepared landing zones by directing air strikes using delay-fuzed or "daisy cutter" bombs to blast gaping holes in the dense vegetation.¹¹¹

At 0600, 30 March, the 3d Marine Division launched the diversionary operation northeast of Dong Ha. Task Force Kilo, composed of the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines; the 3d Squadron, 5th Cavalry; and two ARVN infantry battalions, attacked north toward the DMZ along the coastal plains near Gio Linh. Encountering light resistance, the task force reached its objectives the first day, but continued the operation through 1 April to mask the preparations for Pegasus.¹¹²

As a final step for the coming offensive, Operation Scotland at Khe Sanh came to a close on 31 March, and General Rosson at that time placed the 26th Marines under the 1st Air Cavalry for Operation Pegasus.^{***} Intelligence reports from Khe Sanh indicated that the North Vietnamese were abandoning their positions around the combat base and retiring to Laos, leaving a few units in place to cover the withdrawal. Prisoners reported that NVA units suffered from low morale as a result of heavy casualties and severe supply problems.¹¹³ The enemy, reportedly, was having "difficulty coordinating anything larger than a company operation."¹¹⁴ The allied forces poised to attack these battered North Vietnamese units numbered over 30,000 troops organized into 19 infantry battalions with a host of supporting artillery, engineer, and aviation units, making Operation Pegasus "the largest III MAF offensive of the war," up to that time.¹¹⁵

Despite the extensive preparations and high expectations, Operation Pegasus started not with a bold and powerful thrust, but with a decidedly more ponderous motion. At H-hour—0700, 1 April—foul weather grounded the helicopters of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, but the men of the 1st Marines, on foot, crossed the line of departure on time, initiating the offensive. The regiment attacked along Route 9 with the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines north of the road and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines south of it. As the infantry moved forward, the 11th Engineer Battalion opened Route 9, removing mines and obstacles from the road and repairing bridges, culverts, and bypasses. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines remained at Ca Lu, providing security for the recently completed LZ Stud.¹¹⁶

By 1300, the weather cleared, allowing Tolson's 3d Brigade to conduct the planned air assaults into landing zones along Route 9 west of the 1st Marines.

*See Chapter 13 for the establishment of Prov Corps.

**Actually outside of the 1st Marines regimental headquarters, only the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines had participated in the battle for Hue. See Chapters 9–12.

***General Rosson remembered that Major General Tompkins "suggested to me that the 26th Marines be placed under the operational control of the 1st Cavalry Division to facilitate coordination as the relieving forces approached the combat base." Gen William B. Rosson, Comments on draft, dtd 27Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File).

Despite the delay, the brigade secured its landing zones and flew in its artillery before nightfall. Throughout the area of operations, allied forces made only light contact with the North Vietnamese. In the following days, the operation continued in the pattern set on D-day, including the seemingly obligatory bad weather in the mornings, which forced delays in airmobile operations. The North Vietnamese remained elusive.¹¹⁷

The garrison at Khe Sanh joined the offensive on 4 April from the combat base when the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines sortied against Hill 471. With Company B protecting the perimeter at the rock quarry west of the combat base, the battalion moved to the line of departure at 0230, finally leaving the positions it had defended for 73 days. At 0600, the Marines attacked along the fog-shrouded Che Rien Ridge toward Hill 471, which lay two kilometers to the southeast. Following a lengthy artillery and air preparation, Company A assaulted the hill at 1500. The defenders, a reinforced platoon of the *8th Battalion, 66th NVA Regiment*, put up a spirited fight, but Company A soon overwhelmed them, securing the hill at 1600. The attack cost the battalion 10 dead and 56 wounded. The enemy left 16 dead on the objective.¹¹⁸

The North Vietnamese were not content to give up Hill 471 that easily. Shortly after the Marines overran the hill, enemy rocket fire began and by midnight, 192 rounds had fallen. At 0430, two companies of the *66th NVA Regiment* assaulted Captain Ralph H. Flagler's Company C on the eastern half of the hill. Company A, located on the western side, was masked by the crest of the hill and could not fire in support. North Vietnamese infantry swarmed up the slope firing rifles, sub-machine guns, and RPGs, while heavy machine guns pounded Company C's positions. The enemy advanced to within 20 meters of the Marine fighting holes, but Flagler's men stood fast, with the help of almost 1,000 rounds of artillery fire from the 1st Battalion, 13th Marines. By 0630, the enemy attack was spent and the North Vietnamese withdrew. At a cost of 1 Marine dead and 28 wounded, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines killed over 140 North Vietnamese and captured 5 prisoners.¹¹⁹

Other units of the Khe Sanh garrison went on the offensive as well. On 6 April, Captain Lee R. Overstreet's Company G, 2d Battalion, 26th Marines left Hill 558 in the early morning on the battalion's first long distance patrol of the Khe Sanh battle. Its mission was to determine if the enemy occupied the ridge which extended southeast from Hill 861 like a huge, stubby finger pointed at the combat base.¹²⁰

Just before noon, as the company reached the crest of the ridge, North Vietnamese concealed in camouflaged, mutually supporting bunkers opened fire, cutting down several Marines at point-blank range. Unable to advance into the heavy and accurate enemy fire, Company G suffered additional casualties as Marines tried to recover the fallen men nearest the enemy positions. Captain Overstreet called for artillery and air support, but the number of aircraft available was limited and the artillery frequently entered a "check fire" status to allow for the safe passage of planes supporting other units. Because of these fire support coordination problems, the Marines could not overcome the stiff enemy resistance atop the ridge. With six Marines missing in action, but presumed to be dead within the enemy perimeter, Captain Overstreet ordered Company G to withdraw to Hill 558 at nightfall "as a result of regimental policy to recall units to the defensive positions for the night." In addition to the 6 MIAs, Company G lost 4 killed and 47 wounded and claimed 48 NVA died in the fight.^{121*}

Elsewhere in the area, many major events took place on 6 April, giving Operation Pegasus the appearance of a three-ring circus. The 1st Battalion, 26th Marines attacked out of the combat base to the south, sending Company D against the NVA bunker complex where 25 missing members of Company B had last been seen during operations on 25 February and 30 March. Company D recovered the remains of 21 Americans.¹²² The 1st Air Cavalry Division's 3d Brigade, clearing Route 9 in the area west of the 1st Marines, encountered a strong NVA blocking position and fought a day-long battle which ended when the enemy fled, leaving 83 dead.¹²³ At noon, the men of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines became the first defenders of Khe Sanh relieved in Operation Pegasus when the 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry landed at Hill 471 and assumed responsibility for its defense.¹²⁴ The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines immediately attacked westward toward Hill 689. As a climax to the many events of the day, the ARVN 84th Company, 8th Airborne Battalion landed by helicopter at the Khe Sanh Combat Base and linked up with the ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion. This marked the first entry of an organized ground combat unit into the base since the Rangers themselves had arrived on 27 January.¹²⁵

The momentum of the offensive continued unabated on 7 April. The 2d Battalion, 26th Marines returned to the scene of the previous day's ambush,

*The six missing Marines were later found dead on the ridge.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191220

Top, PFC Murray C. Henderson of Company F, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines cools himself off using his helmet as a bucket on the way from Ca Lu to relieve Khe Sanh during Operation Pegasus. Below, a Marine convoy moves along Route 9 between Ca Lu and Khe Sanh. This road had been closed since the previous summer.

this time with two companies, and cleared the ridge of enemy, killing over 30. The 1st Battalion, 9th Marines continued the westward advance it had begun the previous afternoon, capturing Hill 552 with no enemy resistance. Near Khe Sanh Village, the 2d Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division captured the old French fort after a three-day battle against an NVA battalion. Along Route 9, the 1st Marines conducted a few airmobile operations of its own, as the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines searched the vicinity of the highway for signs of enemy activity which might threaten the 11th Engineer Battalion's road repair project. The 3d Brigade of General Tolson's division pressed on along Route 9, still west of the 1st Marines.¹²⁶

Enemy resistance began crumbling even further as the allied force maintained pressure. Units reported finding many abandoned weapons and large numbers of North Vietnamese bodies and mass graves as enemy units withdrew toward Laos. Some organized resistance remained, however, as the Communist forces continued to conduct limited objective ground attacks and probes in some areas.¹²⁷

The much awaited linkup of U.S. forces at the Khe Sanh Combat Base proper occurred at 0800 on 8 April, when the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry entered the base along the coffee plantation road.¹²⁸ As the 3d Brigade began moving in, the 26th Marines prepared to depart the base it had defended amid so much

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191584



adversity and for so long. But the offensive did not slow down, even for this event. West of the base, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines advanced onto Hill 689 which had, for 11 weeks, dominated its position at the quarry. The enemy, although unseen, made their presence felt through steady and accurate mortar fire which killed 9 Marines and wounded 27 during the battalion's advance.¹²⁹

No enemy artillery fire fell on the combat base on 9 April, and General Rosson, commander of the recently formed Provisional Corps, Vietnam, reported to General Cushman that airdrops of supplies were no longer necessary because the airstrip was open to all types of aircraft up to and including C-130s.* In keeping with a plan to begin supplying all units in northwestern Quang Tri from LZ Stud, Operation Pegasus forces began using the ammunition at Khe Sanh in an attempt to draw down the huge stockpiles to a manageable level which III MAF could later evacuate.¹³⁰

The engineers declared Route 9 open to vehicular traffic on 11 April, ending a project involving the replacement of 9 bridges, the construction of 17 bypasses, and the repair of 14 kilometers of road. It was the first time the road was passable from Ca Lu to Khe Sanh since September 1967.¹³¹ The same day, General Rosson ordered the 1st Air Cavalry Division to make ready immediately for offensive operations in the A Shau Valley. Hours later, the division's 1st Brigade left the Khe Sanh area and the ARVN 37th Ranger Battalion followed shortly afterward.¹³²

As Army units prepared to move south, the 1st and the 26th Marines continued offensive operations around Khe Sanh. With patrols reporting enemy units remaining on Hill 881 North, Colonel Bruce F. Meyers, the new commanding officer of the 26th Marines, ordered the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines to clear the hill, scene of the bitter fighting which had marked the beginning of the siege almost three

months before and "the last enemy position posing a threat to Khe Sanh."^{133**}

Unlike Company I's reconnaissance in force of 20 January which was the last time U.S. forces had been near Hill 881 North,^{***} the attack planned for Easter Sunday, 14 April, called for the entire 3d Battalion to take part. With the relief of the main base by the Army, Lieutenant Colonel John C. Studt, who had assumed command of the 3d Battalion the previous month, had consolidated his companies on Hill 881 South. Studt had expanded the area of operations to include "Pork Chop Hill," the high ground immediately to the north, which the North Vietnamese had vacated. With the order to take 881 North, the battalion commander laid on a full menu of fire support, even lining up all eight of the battalion's 106mm recoilless rifles to support the assault. In addition to the howitzers and guns emplaced at the main base and Ca Lu, the battalion also had the support of the three 105mm howitzers on Hill 881S.¹³⁴

After nightfall on the 13th, the battalion prepared to mount the attack. Shortly after midnight, under the cover of darkness, all four companies accompanied by two scout dog teams moved along routes previously secured by patrols into assault positions in the "saddle" located between Hills 881 South and North. Lieutenant Colonel Studt left one platoon of Company I together with his H&S Company on Hill 881 South. He had relieved Captain William Dabney, who had been selected for promotion to major, and placed him in command of a battalion Provisional Weapons Company and rear security on Hill 881 South.^{****} Throughout the night Marine artillery and mortar shells crashed into Hill 881 North, destroying the enemy's bunkers and trenches, as Lieutenant Colonel Studt's Marines waited for daybreak and the order to mount the final attack.¹³⁵

*Colonel Bruce F. Meyers, who relieved Colonel Lownds shortly after this order, remembered that on 13 April 1968, an Air Force C-130 was hit by "rocket shrapnel" as it came in for a landing, shredding its tires, lunging partially off the runway, hitting some equipment, and bursting into flames. Ground rescue crews saved the lives of the crews and most of the passengers. The only person who died in the crash was Felix Poilane, the French planter, who was returning to his plantation located near the fire base. According to Meyers, "while the C-130 was burning on the runway, it shut down the bulk of our airfield activity until it burned down and was finally put out with foam and bulldozed off the runway." Col Bruce F. Meyers, Comments on draft, dtd 20Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Meyers Comments, Feb95.

**Colonel Meyers, who commanded Special Landing Force Alpha prior to his assignment to the 26th Marines, assumed command of the 26th Marines on 12 April. He remembered that on 10 April he departed the LPH *Iwo Jima* and flew to the 3d Marine Division CP at Dong Ha where he received a briefing and his orders: "Move out in the attack and retake the hills around Khe Sanh . . ." He then traveled by helicopter to LZ Stud where Major General Tolson and his staff briefed him further. After the briefing, he flew to Khe Sanh and "began walking the perimeter" with Colonel Lownds. The turnover continued during the next day and finally on the 12th, "we had a very brief change of command ceremony." Meyers Comments, Feb95.

***See Chapter 4.

****Studt not only wanted to use Dabney's experience, but also to keep him relatively safe after being in such an exposed and isolated position for so long. See LtCol John C. Studt, "Battalion in the Attack," *Marine Corps Gazette*, July 1970, pp. 39-44.



Top Photo is courtesy of Col Bruce F. Meyers (Ret) and bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A416482
Top, at a change of command ceremony of the 26th Marines, Col David E. Lownds, left front, is about to turn over command of the regiment to Col Bruce F. Meyers, standing next to him. Col Lownds still has the distinctive moustache that he wore during the entire siege. Below, President Lyndon B. Johnson presents the Presidential Unit Citation Streamer to SgtMaj Agrippa W. Smith, who is holding the colors of the 26th Marines, as Col Lownds, right, who has shaven off his moustache, watches.



Finally, shortly after dawn about 0530, following closely its artillery final preparation fires, the battalion attacked with three companies abreast and the command group and one company in reserve close behind. Surging forward through an eerie and barren landscape of charred limbless trees and huge bomb craters, the Marine battalion rolled up the enemy's defenses on the southern slope of the hill. Colonel Meyers, who watched the attack with Captain Dabney from 881 South, remarked on the effective use of the supporting 106mm recoilless rifle fire. As the Marine lead elements approached a tree line in their "uphill assault . . . the 106's [on Hill 881 South] literally blew the tree line away."¹³⁶ Finally, with the crest of Hill 881 North before it, the battalion called for a massive artillery firing mission. When over 2,000 rounds of artillery fire had fallen on the objective, Company K attacked along the right flank. Captain Paul L. Snead's men rushed through the smoking debris of the NVA defenses, rooting out the defenders from the ruins of bunkers and trenches. At 1428, Company K marked Hill 881 North as friendly territory by raising a U.S. flag which a squad leader had brought along. The 3d Battalion lost 6 dead and 21 wounded. The Marines took two prisoners from the *8th Battalion, 29th Regiment, 325th NVA Division* and killed over 100 of the North Vietnamese troops. With the enemy driven from the hill, at least for the time being, the Marines began withdrawing to Hill 881 South, their mission accomplished. According to Colonel Meyers, the Marine Corps Schools at Quantico, Virginia, later used the assault on Hill 881 North "as a classic example of a Marine battalion in the attack."¹³⁷

The attack on Hill 881 North was the last battle of Operation Pegasus. At 0800, 15 April, the 3d Marine Division once again assumed responsibility for the Khe Sanh Combat Base and Operation Pegasus gave way to Operation Scotland II. The 1st Air Cavalry Division transferred its command post to Camp Evans, but left its 2d Brigade under the control of the 3d Marine Division. The 1st Marines, to this point still operating along Route 9 just west of Ca Lu, moved to Khe Sanh to assume responsibility for defense of the combat base from the 26th Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Studt recalled that his 3d Battalion, on 15 April, "was shuttled out of the 881 area by choppers . . . first to Khe Sanh than to Quang Tri [Airfield]." Even as the Marines boarded their helicopters out of the Khe Sanh sector, Company K came under enemy mortar fire. As the helicopters landed at the Quang Tri Airstrip, the 3d Marine Division band,

playing the Marine Corps Hymn, was there to greet the troops. According to the band master,

... it was the most inspiring performance of his career: chopper after chopper disgorging filth covered Marines in tattered and torn utilities, some with bandages, many carrying NVA souvenirs, but the expressions on their faces as soon as they perceived the strains of the Hymn was what moved him.

With a sense of irony, Captain Dabney many years later observed that the attacks on Hill 881 North marked the beginning and the end to the siege.¹³⁸

In Operation Pegasus, allied forces accomplished their mission of reopening Route 9 between Ca Lu and Khe Sanh at a cost of 92 Americans dead and 667 wounded, and 51 ARVN killed. The North Vietnamese lost over 1,100 killed and 13 captured. III MAF units found supply caches estimated as "exceeding the basic load for an NVA division," including 3,000 tons of rice, over 200 crew-served weapons, 12,000 rounds of large caliber ammunition, 5 wheeled vehicles, and a tank.

A cloud of controversy has surrounded the story of Khe Sanh in the years since the battle. Some of the unsettled issues remain: 1. the reasons for defending the base in the first place; 2. the importance of the roles played by the various supporting arms (particularly B-52s, as opposed to tactical aircraft and artillery); 3. the failure of the 26th Marines to reinforce Lang Vei; 4. speculation why the North Vietnamese made no attempt to cut the source of the water supply for the base, pumped from a stream north of the Khe Sanh perimeter and in the area controlled by NVA troops; 5. and finally whether Khe Sanh was an attempted replay of Dien Bien Phu or a diversion for Tet.*

*Both Lieutenant General Krulak, the former CGFMFPac, and Colonel Frederic S. Knight, the 3d Marine Division G-2 or staff intelligence officer, remarked on the failure of the North Vietnamese to cut the water supply. In his book, General Krulak argued that the fact that the North Vietnamese did not do so is an indication that the enemy may have "had no intention of undertaking an all-out assault on the base." LtGen Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight, An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps* (Naval Institute Press: Annapolis, Md., 1984), p. 218. Colonel Knight called this failure the most "puzzling aspect of the siege. . . . They literally could have cut off our water." He observed that the air-lifting of the water would have "added an enormous logistical burden." Col Frederic S. Knight, Comments on draft, dtd 10Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File). In his comments, Colonel Steen observed that "when the hose was cut by artillery fragments or the pump was down, we were out of water and on our knees." He observed that as it was the Marines rationed their water until they left in April and "personal sanitation was at a minimum." Steen Comments. Navy Captain Bernard D. Cole also commented on the failure of the NVA to interrupt the water and as well remarked that they made no attempt to cut the land line telephone connection from Khe Sanh to MACV. Cole Comments.

Controversy aside, there is little question that the North Vietnamese committed considerable resources to the battle and that their units fought hard in what appeared to have been a major effort. The U.S. and South Vietnamese defenders of the Khe Sanh Combat Base surrounded and outnum-

bered, nevertheless, with the use of extensive supporting arms skillfully fought a difficult battle against a resolute enemy until the siege was lifted in Operation Pegasus. By any accounting, Pegasus regained the initiative for III MAF forces in northwestern Quang Tri Province.

CHAPTER 15

The Battle for Dong Ha

*Why Dong Ha?—The Fight for Dai Do, The First Day—The Continuing Fight for Dai Do
The End of the First Offensive—The Second Offensive*

Why Dong Ha?

With the commitment of large U.S. forces to the far western reaches of I Corps in Operations Scotland II around Khe Sanh and Delaware in the A Shau Valley, the North Vietnamese decided to mount a new offensive in the eastern DMZ. Perhaps hoping that the American command with its attention riveted to the west would be caught off guard, the *320th NVA Division* at the end of April and early May struck in the sector just above Dong Ha. Dong Ha served not only as the command post for both the 3d Marine Division and the 9th Marines, but also remained the main logistic base for the north. It lay at the junction of Routes 1 and 9 and was the terminus of the Cua Viet River route. During the month of April, while the new Quang Tri base and Wunder Beach further

south in Quang Tri Province alleviated some of the logistic pressure on Dong Ha, nearly 63,000 tons of supplies came in by sea at the Cua Viet port facility for the 3d Marine Division and then were shipped up the Cua Viet River to Dong Ha.¹

Despite its obvious importance, Dong Ha was vulnerable to a determined enemy attack. The most immediate available troops were from the nearby 2d ARVN Regiment which had its command post in the town of Dong Ha. Marine support units rather than line infantry were at the Dong Ha base itself. Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins' only reserve was Task Force Robbie, under Colonel Clifford J. Robichaud, consisting of a rifle company, Company D, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, and an armored company, Company A, 3d Tank Battalion, reinforced by four Army vehicles including two M42 "Dusters," a pla-

An aerial photo shows the sprawling Dong Ha base and surrounding terrain. Dong Ha was the headquarters and forward base of the 3d Marine Division. The airstrip can be seen in the center of the picture.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A801122



toon of Ontos, and a platoon of engineers. For the most part, even this modest force was committed elsewhere.²

Furthermore, Dong Ha lay just below where three ongoing operations converged. To the west of Route 1, the 9th Marines conducted Operation Kentucky with three battalions, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines; 1st Battalion, 4th Marines; and the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. The 3d Marines, to the east of Route 1, was responsible for the Napoleon/Saline sector, also with three battalions under its operational control, the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines; the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion; and BLT 2/4. Between the two Marine regiments, the 2d ARVN Regiment with four battalions* held the area of operations along both sides of Route 1, north of the Bo Dieu River** and Dong Ha, to the Demilitarized Zone. This sector included both the A-1 and A-2 (Gio Linh) and the C-1 and C-2 Dyemarker positions, and much of the Leatherneck Square sector east of Route 1 to Jones Creek, the tributary of the Ben Hai that ran north and south, and emptied into the Cua Viet. The North Vietnamese were well aware of the unit boundaries, which only changed occasionally after some negotiations, and were not slow to make use of the allied dispositions for their own advantage.

During most of April, in both the Kentucky and Napoleon/Saline areas, the tempo of operations had slowed from the previous month. This was especially true of the Napoleon/Saline coastal sector after the Task Force Kilo offensive at the beginning of April. With only scattered actions during the rest of the month, the 3d Marines had turned much of its attention to civic action and refugee resettlement. After the initial clearing offensive north of the Cua Viet, many of the South Vietnamese farmers and fishermen attempted to return to their abandoned villages north of the waterway. As Lieutenant Colonel William Weise, the BLT 2/4 commander, remembered, "things had calmed down" but he suspected "that the enemy had shifted his major efforts westward into the ARVN area."³

For some time, through prisoner interrogations and captured enemy documents, the 3d Marine Division

staff knew that elements of the 320th NVA Division had infiltrated into the eastern DMZ sector. During the last week of April, Navy Task Force Clearwater, which was responsible for convoying and protecting the shipping on the Cua Viet, received reports of enemy intentions to interdict the waterway. Also during this period, the North Vietnamese guns north of the Demilitarized Zone increased their bombardment of allied positions and especially of the port facilities both at Dong Ha and at the mouth of the Cua Viet.⁴

On the afternoon of the 29th, the 320th initiated attacks against the ARVN 2d Regiment and against the Marines in the Kentucky area of operations. On 29 April, enemy sappers blew a culvert on Route 1 near the hamlet of An Binh, about four miles north of Dong Ha. Acting upon intelligence that North Vietnamese regulars had entered An Binh, the ARVN 2d Regiment sent in its 1st and 4th Battalions north from Dong Ha and south from C-1 to investigate the incident and trap any enemy forces between them. The ARVN units themselves, however, encountered heavy resistance "which they could not handle" and called for assistance. According to a newspaper account, Lieutenant Colonel Vu Van Giai, the 2d ARVN commander, told Major General Tompkins that "he was holding on the road but that he was worried about some new pressure that was starting to build up on his left flank." At that point, about 1415, Major General Tompkins ordered Task Force Robbie to move from C-3 with Company D, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, reinforced by Company A, 1st Tank Battalion, to assist the ARVN.⁵

At Cam Vu on Route 88, a secondary route running parallel and 3,000 meters north of Route 9, about 5,000 meters west of An Binh, the Marine task force ran into a North Vietnamese blocking force waiting for them. In a seven-hour "sharp engagement," lasting from 1600 till nearly midnight, Task Force Robbie suffered casualties of 11 dead and 22 wounded and reported killing 26 of the enemy. Four of the tanks with the task force also sustained damage. Task Force Robbie returned to its original positions at C-3. In the meantime, the two South Vietnamese battalions had disengaged and retreated to C-1. The ARVN reported killing 130 of the enemy while taking casualties of 17 dead and 47 wounded.

On the evening of 29 April, concerned about the obvious presence of North Vietnamese units on Route 1, General Tompkins alerted additional forces. He directed Colonel Milton A. Hull, the 3d Marines commander, to be prepared to send a company from the

* An ARVN battalion numbered between 200 and 400 men, less than half of the 900-man Marine battalion.

**The Cua Viet just above Dong Ha becomes the Bo Dieu. On some maps it is also shown as the Mieu Giang. Brigadier General William Weise observed that the "Bo Dieu River (a continuation of the Cam Lo and . . . Mieu Gang) flows east from Dong Ha and empties into the Cua Viet . . . (about 3 km northeast of Dong Ha) which in turn flows into the . . . Gulf of Tonkin . . ." BGen William Weise, Comments on draft, dtd 29Oct92 (Vietnam Comment File).



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191498

A Marine M48 tank and two Marines, part of Task Force Robbie, engage an enemy force near Dong Ha. Task Force Robbie was the 3d Division's small armored reserve force, called after the nickname of its commander, Col Clifford J. Robichaud.

Napoleon/Saline sector to a new defensive position near Route 1. At 1715, Marine helicopters lifted Company E, BLT 2/4 from near the hamlet of Nhi Ha in the Napoleon northwestern sector to just north of the Dong Ha bridge.* Later that night, Tompkins ordered the helicopter lift of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines from the 4th Marines Operation Lancaster II sector to C-3 to reinforce Task Force Robbie.**

On the afternoon of the 30th, the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines arrived at C-3. Reinforced by four tanks from Task Force Robbie, the battalion then pushed forward towards Cam Vu. Just north of Cam Vu, about 1610, Company I of the 3d Battalion, like Task Force Robbie the previous day, came up against North Vietnamese, probably in company strength, in an L-shaped ambush. As Company I attempted to establish a defensive perimeter, the other companies of the battalion and the tanks pushed forward to assist the exposed company. With the coming of the reinforcements, the Vietnamese disengaged under cover of artillery north of

the DMZ and their own mortars.*** The Marine reports showed 41 enemy killed at a cost of 20 Marines dead and 72 wounded. Despite the severity of the clash at Cam Vu the fiercest fighting of the day occurred about 10,000 meters to the northeast, involving BLT 2/4 and units of the 320th NVA Division in the village of Dai Do, about 2,500 meters north of Dong Ha. The battle for Dong Ha had begun.⁷

The Fight for Dai Do, The First Day

Dai Do was actually a cluster of five hamlets, only one of which was actually named Dai Do, on a small peninsula carved out by the Cua Viet where it runs into the Bo Dieu. The Cua Viet rims the eastern edge while the Bo Dieu forms the southern boundary. Two unnamed small tributary streams of the larger rivers outline the northern and western reaches of the peninsula. The northernmost stream which flowed into the Cua Viet marked the boundary between the 2d ARVN Regiment and the 3d Marines. This stream separated the hamlet of Bac Vong in the Napoleon/Saline area of operations from the hamlet of Dong Huan on the northeastern lip of the peninsula. About 500 meters south of Dong Huan was the hamlet of An Loc which overlooked the Bo Dieu. Dai Do was another 500

*There is some question whether Company E actually deployed near the Dong Ha Bridge or to another smaller bridge spanning Route 1 another 5,000 meters north of the Dong Ha Bridge. Brigadier General William Weise insists that it is the latter bridge and the BLT 2/4 CAAR is in error on this matter. BGen William Weise intvw, 21Feb83 (Oral HistColl, MCHC).

**Major Gary E. Todd, who at the time had just joined the battalion as the acting operations officer alpha, remembered that only three of the companies and the battalion command group were committed to the operation. The remaining company stayed at the Rockpile under the executive officer. Maj Gary E. Todd, Comments on draft, dtd 28Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Todd Comments.

***Major Todd recalled that the intermingling of forces limited the use of air support. He observed that the North Vietnamese professionally adjusted their artillery fire and that the Marines faced an "army that was as well equipped as their government and its supporters could afford." Todd Comments.

meters to the northwest abutting the western stream, as were the two remaining adjacent hamlets Dinh To and Thuong Do to the north. Rice paddies and two cemeteries lay interspersed among the five hamlets.

Sometime during the previous days, at least four North Vietnamese battalions, two of them for certain from the *48th* and *52d NVA Regiments* of the *320th NVA Division*, had made their way without being noticed in relatively flat and open terrain, south from the DMZ through the 2d ARVN Regiment into the Dai Do peninsula complex. In a relatively short time, the enemy troops were in formidable defenses. These included a series of fortified A-frame bunkers "covered with several feet of earth, reinforced by bamboo legs, and well-camouflaged" and supplemented by trenches, and fighting holes. Lieutenant Colonel Weise recalled that the bunkers "could support the weight of an M48 tank without collapsing."⁸

All of the North Vietnamese defenses were well designed, protected by barbed wire, mutually supporting, with clear lines of fire, and took advantage of the terrain, especially the hedgerows on the perimeter of each of the hamlets. Lieutenant Colonel Weise later stated that over time, small North Vietnamese units had come into the area and used the local populace to do "most of the work with a few of their officers in there to direct the placements of the various positions." This was all done according to a very careful plan so that all the regulars had to do when they arrived on the scene were to man the positions. Weise personally believed that the only way the enemy accomplished this task was because the 2d ARVN Regiment which was responsible for the sector "was asleep at the switch."^{9*}

*Colonel Max McQuown, whose BLT 3/1 had been relieved by Weise's BLT 2/4 in the Cua Viet, observed that a Vietnamese village or hamlet, "viewed from the air . . . looks like a group of small squates delineated by dense bamboo hedgerows . . . Bamboo will bend with the wind but will not break. The roots are as strong as iron. The NVA converted these natural barriers into formidable defensive positions. They built interconnecting tunnels under each hedgerow, reinforced the rough overhead roof system and cut and camouflaged ground level firing apertures for rifles, machine guns, and RPG's. Mortar positions were located in houses, our buildings, pig sties, or haystacks. The beauty of this defense was the NVA remained in a concealed protected position and, using the connecting tunnels, they could move to any side of a village that was being threatened and engage the enemy without exposing themselves." McQuown agreed in his comments with Weise that "villagers participated in the construction of these bastions," probably having little choice, but that he believed "some of the ARVN had to know what was going on." He declared that the lesson that his BLT learned "was to assume all villages had similar defenses" and to attack with sufficient troops "to get the job done quickly." Col Max McQuown, Comments on draft, dtd 26Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter McQuown Comments.

While the 3d Marine Division had intelligence of the *320th* moving into the eastern sectors with a vague mission of interdicting the Cua Viet, the allies had almost no inkling of the buildup in the Dai Do area. Up to this time, the 3d Marines and 2d ARVN Regiment had encountered mostly small groups in squad or platoon formations, and occasionally a company-size unit to the north, east, and west of Dai Do. The most recent actions provided some evidence that the enemy was perhaps making his main effort to the northwest.¹⁰

In the early morning of the 30th, the North Vietnamese revealed their presence in the Dai Do sector. About 0330 enemy soldiers from positions in the hamlet of An Loc on the northern bank of the Bo Dieu fired upon a Navy Task Force Clearwater river patrol boat with small arms and machine guns. The Navy craft returned the fire and turned back for the Dong Ha ramp area. Approximately a half-hour later, the NVA from the same position opened up upon a Navy LCU, this time with rocket-propelled grenades as well as rifle and machine gun fire. The Navy ship sustained several hits and casualties, one sailor dead and six wounded. This ship too returned to the Dong Ha ramp.¹¹

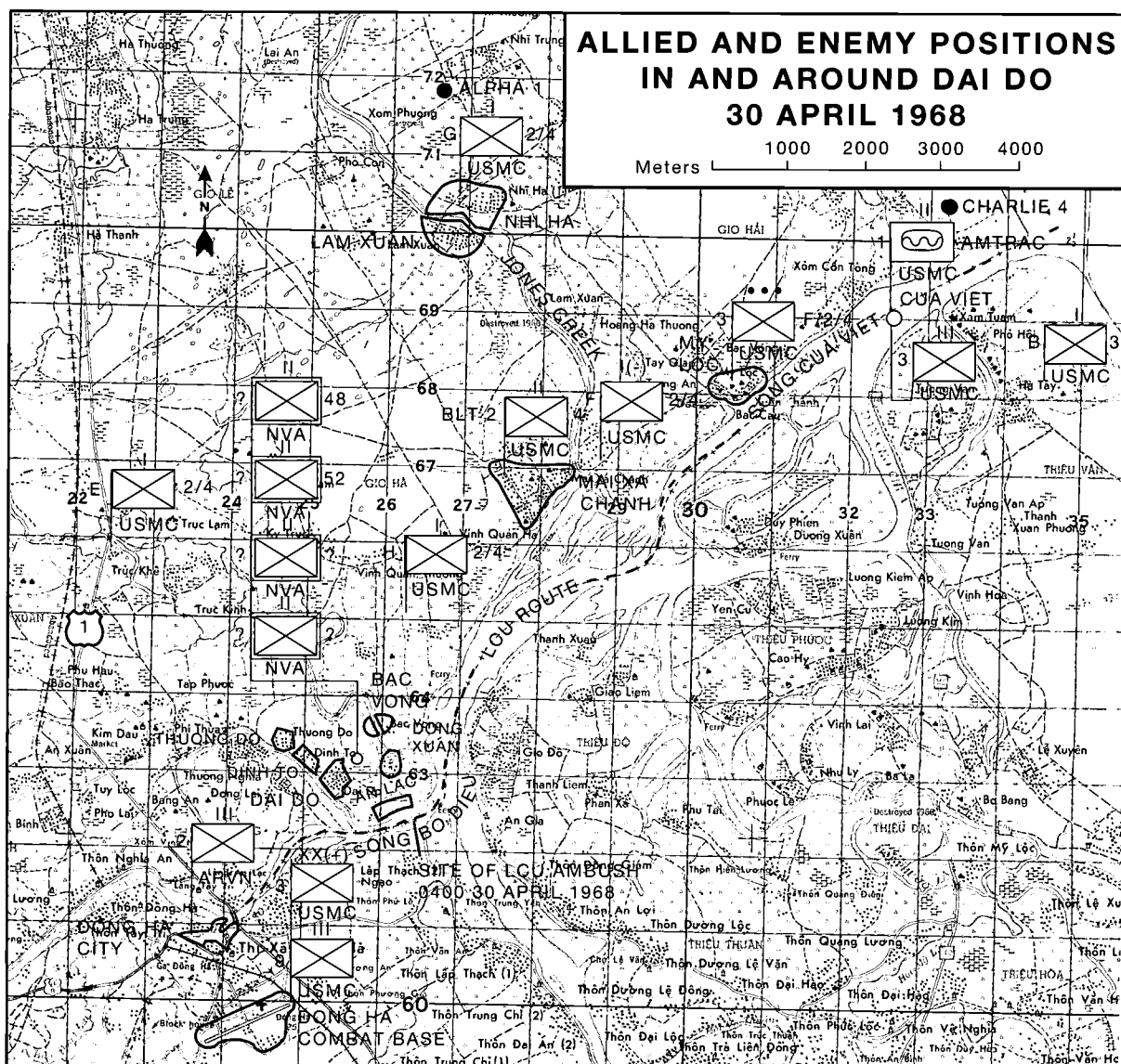
Lieutenant Colonel Weise remembered that he routinely monitored the Task Force Clearwater radio net and overheard the report relative to the last incident, the attack on the LCU. Shortly afterwards, Captain James L. Williams, the commander of Company H, radioed that one of his patrols not too far from the hamlet of Bac Vong had also seen the incident. Weise relayed the information to Colonel Hull, the 3d Marines commander. About two hours later, at daybreak, about 0600, Hull ordered Weise to investigate the incident. Since An Loc was in the 2d ARVN regimental sector, Lieutenant Colonel Weise requested Colonel Hull for a shift of boundaries, which had to be authorized by the 3d Marine Division. While waiting for the permission, Weise then alerted Captain Williams about the situation. About 0700, with the boundary shift approved, the battalion commander ordered Williams to send the platoon near Bac Vong across the adjacent stream and to "reconnoiter area from which attack occurred." At the same time, he directed Williams to "assemble remainder of Hotel [Company H] which was widely dispersed on patrol."¹²

For that matter, at this point of time, Lieutenant Colonel Weise's entire command was widely dispersed. Weise maintained his command post at Mai Xa Chanh at the southern terminus of Jones Creek, about 5,000 meters northeast of Bac Vong, collocated with his Company F. One platoon of Company F

was at My Loc on the Cua Viet, about 3,000 meters east of the company and battalion command posts. Company G was positioned another 3,000 meters to the north of the battalion command post near the hamlets of Lam Xuan and Nhi Ha on both sides of Jones Creek. The previous day, Weise had lost operational control of his Company E, now positioned on Route 1, about 5,000 meters to the west of the Napoleon sector, to the 3d Marine Division. Moreover, according to the battalion commander, he could not move Company G and the Company F platoon at My Loc from their positions without first obtaining the approval of the 3d Marine Division. This, in effect, only left him two maneuverable infantry units

to carry out the mission, Company H and the two platoons of Company F with him at Mai Xa Chanh. At the time he ordered Captain Williams to assemble his company, Lieutenant Colonel Weise also told Captain James H. Butler, the Company F commander, to mount his two platoons on amphibian tractors and to deploy from Mai Xa Chanh to Bac Vong.¹³

About 0830, as the initial platoon of Company H advanced through Bac Vong and approached the stream which had been the original boundary with the 2d ARVN Regiment, the platoon came under heavy rifle and machine gun fire as well as mortar and rocket bombardment. The enemy was well entrenched in the hamlet of Dong Huan just across the stream from Bac



Vong. It was obvious to both Captain Williams and Lieutenant Colonel Weise that it would take more than a platoon to get the North Vietnamese out of the objective area. The battalion commander directed Williams to pull his platoon back and wait for the rest of his company and the two platoons from Company F to arrive. He also reinforced Williams with the reconnaissance platoon attached to his BLT and two M48 tanks. Before the Marines could reach An Loc, they had to eliminate the NVA from Dong Huan.¹⁴

Expecting resistance from the enemy, Weise asked for permission to move Company G from Nhi Ha and the Company F platoon from My Loc to Bac Vong to support the attack. At this time, about 0900, Lieutenant Colonel Weise and a small operational group, consisting of his sergeant major, air liaison officer, and three radio operators, boarded a Navy monitor (an armored LCM 6) so that he could see and possibly control the course of events. According to Weise, the "monitor proved to be an ideal command post with good communications and significant fire power—a breech-loaded 81mm mortar, two 20mm cannons, plus .50- and .30-caliber machine guns." The Navy ship sailed up the Cua Viet from Mai Xa Chanh to a point on the river opposite Dong Huan.¹⁵

Weise's plan for the attack was to have artillery and air to prepare the objective area and then for William's Company H to cross the stream. The two M48 tanks, the reconnaissance platoon, and Company F and the amphibian tractors reinforced with two 106mm recoilless rifles were to lay down a heavy base of fire to cover the Company H attack. Once Company H was well established on the other side of the stream, Company F with the two 106s and the amphibian tractors would cross. Company F was to create a diversionary effort to draw the enemy's attention from Company H, which would then attack Dong Huan. With the securing of Dong Huan, Company F would then take Dai Do. If the situation became tenuous, Lieutenant Colonel Weise, who had received back operational control of his Company G at Nhi Ha, hoped to helilift the latter company back to the former battalion CP at Mai Xa Chanh. From there, the company with the BLT's two tanks would board an LCM-8 to reinforce the two other companies in the Dai Do sector.¹⁶

At first, the plan appeared to be working. With radio links to an aerial observer, the battalion directed helicopter gunship and fixed-wing airstrikes as well as artillery on suspected enemy positions throughout the entire five-hamlet village complex. According to the aerial observer, the airstrikes

knocked out at least three of the North Vietnamese .50-caliber machine gun positions. With the lifting of the air bombardment, Company H crossed the stream about 400 meters northwest of Bac Vong. According to Lieutenant Colonel Weise, "Captain Williams did a masterful job of moving his company . . . across open rice paddies under enemy fire," ford the stream, and then move south, literally crawling the last 1,500 meters, again in the open, to reach the assault position with relatively light casualties. As planned, the tanks, the amphibian tractors, the reconnaissance Marines, and the Marines of Company F provided covering fire for the assault company. The artillery batteries of the 12th Marines used white phosphorous and smoke shells to cloak the movement of Company H.¹⁷

With Company H in the assault positions, the two platoons of Company F on top* of the amphibian tractors crossed the stream and took positions on the right flank of Company H. While Company H was to attack Dong Huan, Captain Butler was to secure Dai Do, about 700 meters to the west of Dong Huan. About 1400, both companies launched their assaults. In a relatively short, but fierce struggle, Company H successfully fought its way into Dong Huan, but at some cost. Among the casualties was Captain Williams, wounded by a grenade about halfway through the hamlet. Williams killed his assailant with a well-placed shot from his .45-caliber service pistol. With the company commander down, First Lieutenant Alexander F. Prescott assumed command, rallied the troops, and continued the attack. By 1500, the Marines controlled Dong Huan. Company H had consolidated its positions and began evacuating its casualties.¹⁸

Captain Butler's Company F with the amphibian tractors had not fared as well. Sporadic enemy artillery from the north and enemy mortars, recoilless rifles, and machine guns from positions in Dai Do prevented the company from reaching its objective. The enemy recoilless rifles took out two of the tractors. As a field expedient, the Marines had mounted their two 106mm recoilless rifles on top of two of the tractors, "secured by sandbags." Despite the added fire power, the 106s failed to silence the enemy weapons in Dai

*Brigadier General Weise later explained that "we usually avoided riding inside the LVTP-5 Amphibian Tractor . . . because its highly volatile gasoline fuel tanks were located beneath the troop compartment. It was feared that there would be little chance of escape if the amtrac struck a land mine. Land mines were plentiful in our area." Weise, "Memories of Dai Do," Footnote 4, Footnotes, p. 3.

Do. Although one of the platoons reached the eastern edge of the hamlet, the other remained in the open in a cemetery about 300 meters to the east. At one point in the course of the afternoon, Captain Butler radioed that he only had "26 effective Marines."¹⁹

Lieutenant Colonel Weise had wanted to reinforce Company F with Company G, but these hopes were soon dashed. The company had prepared for the helilift from Nhi Ha and Lam Xuan back to the battalion CP. After the first wave of helicopters had taken out the 81mm mortar section and some of the supplies, enemy artillery and mortars bombarded the landing zone followed by a ground assault against the company positions. Left with little choice, Captain Manuel S. Vargas,* the company commander, canceled the rest of the helilift. The company beat back the enemy attack and then Vargas ordered the company to make a night march back to Mai Xa Chanh.²⁰

Earlier in the afternoon, Colonel Hull had boarded one of the Navy patrol boats, a lightly armed, 14-foot, fiberglass boat with a 35-horsepower outboard motor that the Marines called "skimmers," to have a look at the situation for himself. He first stopped at Dong Huan and discussed the fighting and evacuation of the casualties with Lieutenant Prescott and then joined Lieutenant Colonel Weise on board the "monitor." According to Weise, Hull told him that now that the "battle was joined we had to maintain pressure on the enemy to keep him off balance." Hull promised the battalion commander operational control of Company B, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, which had a platoon of LVTPs attached to it south of the Bo Dieu.²¹

First Lieutenant George C. Norris, the Company B commander, radioed Lieutenant Colonel Weise to report his availability. Weise briefed Norris on the situation and then ordered "his company to mount the amtracs, cross the river, attack and seize An Loc, the hamlet from which the enemy had earlier attacked the Navy Utility Boat." At 1625, the first of two waves of Company B landed on the northern shore of the Bo Dieu River just south of An Loc under covering fire from the weapons of Task Force Clearwater's River Assault Group boats. By 1710, the second wave was ashore, but Company B had only succeeded in establishing a rather insecure beachhead.²²

The enemy greeted the company with automatic weapons, RPGs, mortars, and heavy small arms fire,

not only from inside An Loc but also from the hamlet of Dai Do to the north, and from the hamlet of Dong Lai, about 1,000 meters to the northwest and across the second or western stream in the Dai Do sector. NVA recoilless rifles damaged several of the amphibian tractors, disabling one of the amtracs and destroying another. Despite the strong enemy resistance, in its initial assault, the company pushed through into about half of An Loc. At this point, the casualty toll forced the advance to falter. Lieutenant Norris, the company commander, was dead. A hidden enemy sniper killed the Marine lieutenant as he was being helped to the rear after being seriously wounded. According to Lieutenant Colonel Weise, who had carefully monitored the events ashore, about an hour before dark, he "ordered Bravo Company (now confused, disorganized, and with only one officer left) to halt, reorganize, form a defensive perimeter in the western half of the hamlet . . ."²³

Concerned at the same time about being able to coordinate three separate perimeters, the battalion commander also told Captain Butler of Company F to gather his unit together as best he could outside of Dai Do and withdraw to the positions held by Company H in Dong Huan. Under cover of darkness and with supporting fires provided by Company B and Company H, Company F reached Dong Huan without sustaining further casualties. In fact, Captain Butler discovered that when he had reassembled his company he had about twice the force that he thought he had. With the establishment of the two defensive perimeters at Dong Huan in the north and An Loc in the south, the fighting on the 30th was about over.

During the night of the 30th, the enemy made several probes at Dong Huan, but Companies F and H with the assistance of friendly artillery easily repulsed them. At 2330, although under artillery bombardment by enemy guns north of the DMZ, Company G to the east completed its night march to Mai Xa Chanh from Nhi Ha and Lam Xuan. Company E, however, was still under operational control of the division and remained in its defensive positions on Highway 1, northwest of the Dai Do complex. In the day's action, both the North Vietnamese and the Marine BLT including Company B from the 3d Marines had sustained heavy casualties. The Marines reported approximately 90 enemy killed while suffering losses of 16 dead and 107 wounded.²⁴

At the end of the long day, Lieutenant Colonel Weise remained frustrated. He believed that if he had Companies E and G attached to him from the very beginning that he could have seized both Dai Do and

*On December 26 1973, then Major Vargas legally changed his name from Manuel Sando Vargas to Jay R. Vargas. Col Jay R. Vargas Biographical File (Ref Sec, MCHC).

An Loc after Company H had captured Dong Huan. Moreover, he had requested additional airstrikes* and 8-inch artillery missions which were not forthcoming. He was especially disappointed that he “did not get a radar controlled 2,000 pound bomb strike by Marine A-6 Intruder aircraft.” He asserted that the heavy air and artillery ordnance with delayed fuses would have “cracked some of the enemy’s . . . fortifications” and “followed by napalm” would possibly have destroyed the enemy’s defenses. It was obvious to Weise that his unit did not have priority for either air or artillery support. He did not blame Colonel Hull who had given him all the reserve force he had available—Company B, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines. With the piecemealing of his forces into the battle, Weise declared later “I felt ‘an hour late and a dime short’ throughout the fight.”²⁵

From the perspective of General Tompkins at the 3d Marine Division command post, he could not be sure that the main thrust of the enemy was in the Dai Do sector. At the same time that BLT 2/4 fought in Dai Do, the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines at Cam Phu, about three miles to the west, had engaged other elements of the *320th NVA Division*, the same place where Task Force Robbie had run into trouble the day before.** Along Route 1, the 2d ARVN Regiment also reported continuing contact with enemy forces. Together with the attacks on the Navy river boats, Tompkins believed the North Vietnamese poised a real threat to the entire coastal plain from Cam Phu south to Quang Tri. Still, according to Major William H. Dabney, recently promoted and a former company commander at Khe Sanh reassigned to the 3d Marine Division G-3 staff at this

time, General Tompkins entered the division FSIC (Fire Support Information Center) on the evening of the 30th and ordered the artillery commander, “to take every tube that is in range of Dai Do . . . to shift its trail so that it is pointing at the Dai Do area and . . . fire max sustained rate with every tube all night.”²⁶

In an interview a few days after the initial action, a reporter quoted General Tompkins as stating, “Yes, I can tell you the exact moment when I made up my mind it was going to be a real battle—it was at 9:15 Tuesday morning (April 30).” According to the Tompkins interview, when the general looked at the map, the “situation was pretty obvious.” He believed, “the whole picture adds up to one of two things—the enemy was either driving through to Dong Ha itself, or he was planning to . . . slip by one or both sides of Dong Ha, and go for the provincial capital of Quang Tri, just eight miles due south.” According to Tompkins such a threat was more than the 2d ARVN Regiment could handle, “it was time to call in the Marines.”²⁷

The 3d Marine Division commander only had a limited number of reserves that he could throw into the battle.*** Tompkins believed that the insertion of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines at Cam Phu contained the enemy forces to the west. He still remained concerned, however, about the capability of the ARVN to hold the center and also about the uncovering of the northern approaches to Dong Ha with the withdrawal of Company G from Nhi Ha and Lam Xuan. As Lieutenant Colonel Weise later observed, “Nhi Ha had always been a key staging area for NVA infiltrating south along ‘Jones Creek’.” With BLT 2/4 committed to Dai Do, only the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines remained in the Napoleon/Saline sector, safeguarding the southern banks of the Cua Viet. General Tompkins request-

*Up to this point, possibly because of the new single manager system that had just been established “fixed-wing air support required a 36-hour notice before it could be planned on. This caused problems when situations would change between the planning stage and actual execution of an operation order.” According to the BLT 2/4 after action report, “as the battle of Dai Do proceeded it became less difficult to get the close air support that the BLT requested.” BLT 2/4 CAAR, *Operation Napoleon*, pp. 3–4. Colonel Max McQuown, who at the time commanded BLT 3/1, observed, however, that in the 3d Marine Division, “close air support was always a crap shoot. Requesting units just never knew if the requested strike would occur.” He claimed that these air support problems existed even before the advent of “Single Manager.” McQuown stated that the “glaring problem was that all air support requests had to be forwarded to the 3d Division air officer instead of going directly to the DASC, . . . the agency that was supposed to coordinate and control all air.” McQuown Comments.

**In fact a contemporary Army historical account of the battle gives much more emphasis on the ARVN and Cam Phu action and does not even mention the fighting in Dai Do on 30 April, but begins its description with events there on 1 May. Waldron and Beavers, “The Critical Year,” pp. 57–59.

***While the 26th Marines had deployed to the Quang Tri base after Khe Sanh on 18 April, the regiment was basically recuperating from its ordeal at Khe Sanh. Colonel Bruce F. Meyers, who had just assumed command of the 26th Marines in April, recalled that the regiment was “being reequipped and obtaining replacements (the bulk of the regiment’s artillery, motor transport, generators, mess equipment, virtually all of the ‘heavy’ TO/E gear had been shot up and/or left at Khe Sanh when we pulled out.” Temporarily the regiment conducted a rice protection operation appropriately named “Operation Rice” in the area south of the Quang Tri base. Col Bruce F. Meyers, Comments on draft, dtd 20Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File). On the other hand, Colonel Max McQuown, who commanded BLT 3/1 at the time, asserted that either his battalion or the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines were both at Ca Lu, and therefore, “there was a ‘swing’ battalion available to go anywhere in the division TAOR. It could have been 2/9 or BLT 3/1—it turned out to be neither.” McQuown Comments.

ed a battalion of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade, the Prov Corps reserve, from Lieutenant General William B. Rosson, the corps commander, to fill any gaps in the division's defenses. General Rosson remembered Tompkins telling him "that the 320th NVA Division had Dong Ha in its sights."²⁸ At 0900, 1 May, the 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry arrived by helicopter in a landing zone just north of Dong Ha. Later that day, General Tompkins turned over operational control of the Army battalion to the 3d Marines to insert into the Nhi Ha and Lam Xuan area.²⁹

The Continuing Fight for Dai Do

The fighting in the Dai Do area, however, was far from over. Just before daybreak on 1 May, a reconnaissance patrol from Company B in An Loc noticed that the North Vietnamese had slipped out of the hamlet. At that point, on order of Lieutenant Colonel Weise, who had come ashore by skimmer boat, the company took over all of An Loc. At daybreak, Com-

pany H in Dong Huan noticed about 60 enemy soldiers moving across an open field rice paddy west of Dai Do and north of An Loc. Calling in supporting arms as well as employing their own rifle and automatic weapons, the Marines of both Companies H and B participated in what amounted to a "turkey shoot." Lieutenant Colonel Weise later speculated that the North Vietnamese may have been "a reinforcing unit looking for the village of Dai Do" or possibly "stragglers . . . from An Loc."³⁰

After this initial action, there was a relative lull in the fighting largely confined to the continuous artillery shelling of Dai Do, as both sides attempted to marshal and reinforce their forces. At first, Lieutenant Colonel Weise had planned to have Captain Vargas' Company G make a night landing at An Loc and then launch a predawn attack on Dai Do. The Navy landing craft that were to carry the Marine company from Mai Xa Chanh to An Loc, however, were not available. Instead Company G, reinforced by the BLT's two tanks, waited at Mai Xa Chanh until about 0830 to board two

Two Marines from BLT 2/4 survey the ruins of the hamlet of Dai Do after several days of heavy fighting. The Marine on the left is carrying three LAAW's (light antiarmor weapons) strapped to his back.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191498



LCM-6s. Lieutenant Colonel Weise, once more in his "skimmer" boat, intercepted Company G on the water. He joined Captain Vargas on the lead LCM and briefed the company commander on the situation and the revised plans. The company was to come ashore at An Loc, pass through Company B's lines, and then take the hamlet of Dai Do. Company B was to remain in reserve, while Companies F and H would provide covering fire from Dong Huan.³¹

As planned, around 1000, Company G landed at An Loc and prepared to launch its attack on Dai Do. So as not to reveal the presence of the two M48 tanks, the amphibian tractors with Company B revved up their engines and made several false starts. Marine artillery and naval gunfire continued to pound the North Vietnamese troops in Dai Do and just after the artillery fire lifted, two Marine A-4s swooped low and dropped bombs and napalm on the hamlet. Passing by the eastern flank of Company B, the Marines of Company G with the tanks between the two assault platoons and under covering smoke and white phosphorous rushed forward to cover the 500 meters of open rice paddy between them and Dai Do.

While heavy mortar and automatic weapons stopped the left flank about 200 meters short of Dai Do, the rest of the company reached the enemy's first line of bunkers. As one company officer told a newspaper reporter later: "We could have used 10 tanks. We had two and we had to send both of them to the rear with damage." The fighting in Dai Do reverted to intensive short-range fighting, with the Marines blowing holes in the enemy bunkers with satchel charges and grenades. Bypassing some of the defenses, by 1400, the company attained the northern reaches of Dai Do. Indicative of the heavy combat, Captain Vargas later related that "I started out with 123 men and by the time I got through the village I was down to 41. . . . Every trooper had a captured AK-47." The Marines also had taken several prisoners.³²

The North Vietnamese were not about to allow the Marines to stay in Dai Do and mounted a counterattack in about battalion strength from both north and west of Dai Do. Employing both well-aimed artillery from positions north of the DMZ and mortars, the enemy troops forced Company G to give ground. Also North Vietnamese troops in Dai Do who had been bypassed, especially in the southwestern part of the hamlet, opened fire on the Marines of Company G from the rear. Given the situation, Lieutenant Colonel Weise ordered Vargas "to fall back and establish a

defensive perimeter in the eastern part of Dai Do." By 1700, Company G had established its new perimeter, called in supporting arms, and waited for resupply and reinforcements and a new enemy attack. In the process, Captain Vargas was wounded but not seriously enough to relinquish command.

While sitting in its new perimeter, Company G reported the sighting of a large number of enemy troops in the vicinity of Truc Kinh, about 3,000 meters northeast of Dai Do. At about the same time, an aerial observer spotted the troop movement at Truc Kinh and also a North Vietnamese artillery forward observation team and called in fixed-wing and helicopter gunships on both positions. According to one report, the fixed-wing sorties killed all 13 of the NVA artillery spotter team, which resulted in a reduction of the effectiveness of the enemy artillery. Lieutenant Colonel Weise remembered that "on our air net we could hear the excited pilots as they strafed, bombed, and rocketed enemy in the open in daylight, a rare sight!" BLT 2/4 now had priority for close air support, although Weise later asserted not as much as "we requested nor as quickly as we needed it."³³

At An Loc, Lieutenant Colonel Weise tried to reinforce Company G. At first, he ordered Company F to attack from Dong Huan to relieve the embattled company. Enemy artillery and automatic weapons and small arms fire stopped the attack far short of its objective. Although the North Vietnamese attempted to jam the Marine radios, the battalion by changing frequencies was able to call in supporting arms including airstrikes to provide protective cover for the second Marine company. At this point, around 1700, Weise had few reserves that he could send into the battle. Although earlier in the day, he had requested and received operational control of his Company E from the 3d Marine Division, the company had not yet arrived from its former position along Route 1. With the number of casualties that it sustained the day before, Company H in Dong Huan was not in any position for "a major effort." This left only Company B, 1st Battalion, 3d Marines at An Loc, where its parent battalion had sent in several replacements including a new company commander, executive officer, and several experienced noncommissioned officers.³⁴

About 1700, Lieutenant Colonel Weise ordered Company B, 3d Marines into the attack. According to Weise, the plan was for the company, on top of the LVTs, to cross rapidly the 500 meters of rice paddy separating it from Dai Do, "dismount and fight its

way to link up with Golf [Company G].” It did not work. The enemy laid down a tremendous amount of both automatic and small arms fire that literally stopped the attack dead in its tracks. Both the new company commander, First Lieutenant Thomas A. Brown, and many of his key personnel were wounded. According to Weise, Company B was in very bad straits—a young, inexperienced Marine officer had assumed the command and was close to panic. At that point, Captain Vargas of Company G made radio contact with him and in a “calm, confident voice settled the excited Marine down, enabling him to gain better control of the situation.”³⁵

Fortunately, Weise’s Company E under Captain James E. Livingston, after crossing the dangerous stream* to the west, arrived at An Loc about 1730 from its former position on Route 1. With the coming of darkness, Lieutenant Colonel Weise ordered Company B to pull back to An Loc. Both Captain Livingston and First Lieutenant Clyde W. Mutter, the commanding officer of the reconnaissance platoon, “personally led a number of small expeditions during darkness, across the fire-swept rice paddies, and helped Bravo Company successively withdraw back to An Loc with all its wounded.” By this time, Company F had rejoined Company H in Dong Huan. In its tight perimeter in the northeastern part of Dai Do, with supporting arms and light provided by flare ships, Company G repulsed several attempts of the North Vietnamese to overwhelm its positions. Casualties had been heavy for both sides on 1 May. The Marines suffered 24 dead and 44 wounded and evacuated. BLT 2/4 took 2 prisoners and reported 91 enemy dead.³⁶

With enemy probes all along his positions, Lieutenant Colonel Weise spent a long sleepless night as he prepared his plans for the next day. Worried about the ability of Company G to continue to hold out in Dai Do, after learning according to one prisoner that the North Vietnamese had at least 12 companies in Dai Do, Weise decided upon a predawn attack. Company E was to attack to the northwest from An Loc into Dai Do and link up with Company G. The two companies would then clear the hamlet. If the attack stalled, Weise planned to send in Company H. Companies F

and B would continue to secure Dong Huan and An Loc, respectively, and be prepared to reinforce.³⁷

About 0500 on 2 May, while Company G provided covering fire, Company E left its line of departure for attack positions south of Dai Do.** Heavy enemy fire caused two of the Company E platoons to hesitate, but Captain Livingston personally led his reserve platoon to regain the momentum. At the same time, Company G attacked the enemy positions in southern Dai Do from the rear. The fighting would continue for several hours at close range with the Marines using flamethrowers, white phosphorous, grenades, satchel charges, and LAAWs (light antitank assault weapons) to crack the NVA bunkers and kill the enemy troops inside them. As one Marine squad leader with Company E observed, the NVA were “in fortified positions and bunkers and not moving.”³⁸ Although wounded by grenade fragments, Captain Livingston continued to encourage and prod his men forward. By about 0930, the two companies had secured Dai Do.³⁹

About a half-hour earlier, Colonel Hull made another visit to Lieutenant Colonel Weise’s temporary command post at An Loc. Satisfied with the progress of the attack, Hull directed the BLT commander to continue “to keep the pressure on the enemy.” Weise remonstrated that his unit “had just about run out of steam.” He recommended instead reinforcement by other battalions to his north and on both his flanks. Using anvil and hammer tactics, the battalions on the north would attack south and squeeze the NVA between them and the Marines in Dai Do. At this point, however, Colonel Hull had few available resources and could only promise Weise that he would try to get the 2d ARVN to cover BLT 2/4’s western flank.⁴⁰

About noon, Colonel Hull informed the BLT 2/4 commander that an ARVN mechanized battalion would be available. Using the stream to the west of Dai Do as a boundary, the ARVN were to capture the ham-

**Master Gunnery Sergeant James W. Rogers, who at the time was the 1st Squad Leader, 3d Platoon, Company E, recalled that during the night of 1–2 May his squad had the mission of establishing an “ambush listening post outside of An Loc and to remain in position until dawn.” He and his squad emplaced their position near a burial mound about 75–100 yards in front of the company perimeter. Just before daylight, they heard voices in front of them. Assured by Captain Livingston that this was not a friendly patrol, Rogers thought that they may be NVA attempting to surrender and called out to them in Vietnamese asking if they were Chieu Hoi. The NVA opened fire and the Marines responded with their M16s and a M60 machine gun. The firefight ended and the Marine squad pulled back to the company perimeter to take part in the attack. MGySgt James W. Rogers, Comments on draft, dtd 21 Nov 94 (Vietnam Comment File).

*According to Lieutenant Colonel Weise the stream was “nearly unfordable,” being about five and a half feet deep and fairly swift running. Livingston solved the problem by having a “half dozen of his tallest Marines strip down, plant themselves in the deepest part of the stream, and pass the shorter, heavily laden Marines hand-to-hand to the shallow water.” Weise, “Memories of Dai Do,” p. 19.

lets of Dong Lai and Thong Nghia across the stream. The Marines would attack north into the hamlets of Dinh To and Thuong Do.

Following his orders to continue the pressure, Lieutenant Colonel Weise ordered Company H into the assault. He told First Lieutenant Prescott, the company commander, to pass through the lines of Companies E and G and seize Dinh To. Leaving the line of departure about 1300, Company H fought its way into about a third of the hamlet. At that point, the enemy counterattacked. While the company maintained its positions, Lieutenant Prescott radioed for assistance, believing that he would be overwhelmed by the next enemy attack.⁴¹

According to Lieutenant Colonel Weise, Captain Livingston in Dai Do did not wait for orders. He gathered up what remained of his company, about 30 men, and rushed forward into Dinh To. Lieutenant Prescott remembered the change in his men when they learned that Company E was on its way:

We were really desperate. Then my radio operator told me, "Captain Livingston is coming." I knew then that we would be O.K. I yelled "Echo is coming." The cry was repeated by others, "Echo is coming . . . Echo is coming." Everyone felt like I did.⁴²

For a time, both companies rallied and appeared to have gained the upper hand, but not for long. Although Lieutenant Prescott sustained a serious wound and was evacuated to the rear, Second Lieutenant Bayard V. Taylor assumed command of Company H and effectively took control. The two companies fought their way through a series of trenches until stopped by an enemy machine gun. At that juncture, the North Vietnamese mounted yet another attack. According to Lieutenant Taylor:

The enemy counterattack dwarfed the fighting that had gone before in intensity and volume. I recall seeing banana trees and the masonry walls of a hootch cut down by the [NVA] automatic weapons fire. The bushes to our front seemed to be alive with heavily camouflaged NVA soldiers.⁴³

Sergeant James W. Rogers, an acting platoon leader with Company E, remembered much the same: "NVA soldiers were all over . . . as soon as you shot one, another would pop up in his place. We were receiving a lot of machine gun fire." Rogers credited the "coolness and calmness" of the Company E commander, Captain Livingston, "who seemed to be everywhere," with keeping the Marines "from panicking."⁴⁴

About 1430, Lieutenant Colonel Weise, who had moved his forward command post to Dai Do,

ordered the two companies to disengage and return to the battalion command post. An injured Captain Livingston, unable to walk because of machine gun rounds in both his legs, insisted that he not be helped to the rear until the rest of the wounded had been evacuated. Under the cover of Marine airstrikes and supporting artillery, the two companies pulled back with all of their wounded to the relative safety of Dai Do.

By this time, Weise received the information that the ARVN mechanized battalion had occupied Dong Lai, about 500 meters to the west of Dai Do. With the approval of Colonel Hull, the Marine battalion commander worked out a plan for the Marine and ARVN battalion to advance abreast along both sides of the stream—the Marines again to move into Dinh To and the ARVN to push from Dong Lai to Thuong Nghia, a distance of some 1,000 meters to the northwest. According to Weise, "coordination and communication was difficult at best," but he had no spare officer to send as a liaison to the ARVN. Both he and his operations officer, Major George F. Warren, however, talked by radio to the U.S. Army advisor with the ARVN unit who assured them that the ARVN battalion commander understood and agreed to the plan.⁴⁵

For the attack, Weise selected Companies G and F. Although Company G was down to about 40 men, it still had four officers. Company F, which had been reinforced by the platoon at My Loc, had about 80 men. Captain Vargas' Company G was to be in the lead followed "in trace by Company F." The idea was for Company G to advance rapidly until it encountered enemy resistance and then for Company F to push through and continue the attack. Lieutenant Colonel Weise and a small command group accompanied Company G. Major Warren, the operations officer, assumed command of the perimeter formed by Companies E and H in Dai Do. Company B remained in An Loc in what had become the BLT rear sector.⁴⁶

Close to 1600, under cover of Marine air and artillery, the two companies moved into the attack. This time, Company G only met sporadic small arms fire as it pushed through Dinh To. Company F, however, became bogged down in the rice paddies east of the hamlet where it came under artillery and heavy automatic weapons fire from its northeast. Unaware that Company F was not behind it, Company G drove to the southern edge of Thuong Do. At that point, however, the company took fire from its front and

right flank. According to Weise, he told Captain Vargas to halt and for Company F to move up, only then to discover that the latter company was not where he thought it was. About the same time, about 1700, Company G came under automatic weapons fire on its left flank and left rear from across the stream, an area supposedly secured by the ARVN mechanized battalion in its armored personnel carriers (APCs). In fact, Lieutenant Colonel Weise remembered that when “we first received fire from over there, we thought it was them [the ARVN] . . . We saw a large number over there to the left and we didn’t realize that they were NVA and not ARVN that were on the move until we realized that we saw no APCs. Ten or 15 minutes we looked at those guys.”⁴⁷

BLT 2/4 was in an untenable situation. In effect, its lead companies were in unprotected perimeters with enemy troops in between them. Weise later related, “There was just one hell of a donnybrook and ‘Charlie, bar the door situation.’” The battalion commander called in artillery, “all around and top of us.” An enemy RPG round killed Weise’s Sergeant Major, John Malnar, and Weise himself was seriously wounded by an NVA AK-47 rifle. The battalion commander praised Captain Vargas, who also had sustained a minor wound, for his conduct of the battle: “He was everywhere at once . . .”⁴⁸

Company G stopped the initial enemy frontal attack and then turned around “and picked off most of the enemy” coming at it from the rear. According to Weise, “every Marine who was able to shoot, including wounded who could handle a weapon, fired and the fighting was violent and close.” Using the tactic of withdrawal by fire teams, with two able-bodied Marines dragging a wounded man, the company fought its way back to the positions held by Company F. The two companies then retreated to Dinh To where they were met by Major Warren, the operations officer, who had organized a provisional platoon supported by amphibian tractors.⁴⁹

After evacuating the most seriously wounded, including Lieutenant Colonel Weise,* by 1800, the battalion had once more consolidated its perimeter in Dai Do. With replacements and some reorganization, each company consisted of 40 men and 1 officer.

* An Associated Press photograph taken at the time shows a still feisty Lieutenant Colonel Weise with a fat cigar in his mouth lying on a litter holding his own plasma bottle in an evacuation area near Dai Do. Clipping from the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, p. 2 (Weise Folder, Dai Do).



Photo courtesy of BGen William Weise, USMC (Ret)

A seriously wounded but still feisty LtCol William Weise, with a cigar in his mouth, lies on a litter holding his own albumin serum bottle awaiting medical evacuation. In the background, Navy medical personnel and Marines attend to other wounded.

Major Warren had assumed command of the battalion from Lieutenant Colonel Weise and was in turn relieved later that night by Major Charles W. Knapp, the battalion executive officer, who had maintained the BLT rear headquarters on board the *Iwo Jima* (LPH 2). In the fighting for the Dai Do village complex on 2 May, the 3d Marines reported casualties of 40 Marines dead and 111 wounded and the killing of nearly 380 of the enemy.

The fight for Dai Do was practically over. Although there were further probes on the night of 2–3 May on the Marine lines in the hamlet of Dai Do, by daybreak there was little sign of the enemy. Aerial observers saw small groups of North Vietnamese retreating north from Thuong Do and called in airstrikes. Later that day, Lieutenant Colonel Charles V. Jarman’s 1st Battalion, 3d Marines took over from BLT 2/4 responsibility for the Dai Do sector. The 1st Battalion made a sweep through the hamlets of Dinh To and Thuong Do without incident. Companies G and H of BLT 2/4, which were temporarily under the operational control of Jarman, followed in trace and collected the Marine dead



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191447
Marines of BLT 2/4 board a "Mike" boat (landing craft, mechanized) for return to their base area in the Napoleon/Saline area of operations, after inflicting and sustaining large casualties in the Dai Do village complex.

from the previous day's fighting who could not be evacuated.* By 1935, on 3 May, Companies G and H had completed their grisly mission and began to depart the Dai Do area. Shortly after 2100, the last elements of the two companies had returned to the BLT's old command post at Mai Xa Chanh.⁵⁰

The three-day fight for the Dai Do complex had been a bloody one for both sides. From 30 April through 2 May, BLT 2/4 had sustained casualties of 81 dead and nearly 300 wounded.** Marine estimates of the number of enemy dead ranged from nearly 500 to

over 600. According to Lieutenant Colonel Weise, based on the estimates and counts made by other units around Dai Do, the Marines found 600 bodies in the immediate area of the battle and another 500 to 600 in the extended battle area. Admitting that "body count figures are always suspect," Weise, nevertheless argued that even if one "cut these figures in half for inflation, you're talking about the equivalent of two enemy regiments that were decimated in that area." Lieutenant Colonel Weise later received the Navy Cross and Captains Vargas and Livingston were later awarded the Medal of Honor for their actions in the Dai Do battles.⁵¹

The End of the First Offensive

While the Dai Do sector may have been the site of the heaviest fighting during this period, the 320th NVA Division had not limited its efforts only to this area. Throughout the three-day period, from 30 April through 2 May, the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines near Cam Phu continued to have sporadic contact with scattered units of the enemy division. The 2d ARVN Regiment also reported continuous action during the night of 1–2 May. Its 1st Battalion sustained 5 dead and 16 wounded in taking Dong Lai to the west of Dai Do and claimed killing 39 of the North Vietnamese.⁵²

To the northeast, the Army's 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry ran into the most intense combat outside of that in Dai Do in the Nhi Ha sector along Jones Creek. The departure of Company G from the Nhi Ha and the Lam Xuan village complexes on the night of 30 April–1 May, left the entire Jones Creek area open to the North Vietnamese. With the assignment of the Army battalion of the 196th Light Infantry Brigade to the operational control of the 3d Marines on the evening of 1 May to fill that gap, Colonel Hull ordered the commander of the 3d Battalion, Army Lieutenant Colonel William P. Snyder, to reenter the area the following morning.⁵³

About 0800 on 2 May, the battalion landed in a helicopter landing zone near Lam Xuan East (located on the eastern bank of Jones Creek and so designated to differentiate it from its neighboring hamlet with the same name located on the opposite bank about 1,000 meters to the northwest). The battalion occupied the two Lam Xuans with relative ease, and then moved on to Nhi Ha. At this juncture, the North Vietnamese sprung one of their traps. In close combat, the enemy killed 9 of the American soldiers and wounded 15.

*Colonel Charles V. Jarman, whose 1st Battalion, 3d Marines relieved BLT 2/4, recalled that several of the Marine dead had their hands tied behind their back. It was his belief that these Marines "were captured and subsequently executed by the NVA when the battle appeared to be going against them." Col Charles V. Jarman, Comments on draft, dtd 12Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

**All of the sources basically agree about the number of Marine dead. The listing of the number of wounded, however, vary from 247 mentioned by III MAF to 297 according to Brigadier General Weise. According to General Weise, his personnel officer gave the figures of 81 KIA and 297 wounded and evacuated while he "was in the hospital ward aboard the U.S.S. *Iwo Jima*." BGen William Weise (Ret) ltr, dtd 11Mar83 to BGen Edwin H. Simmons (Ret) (Weise Folder, Dai Do).

Another four were missing. The Army battalion fell back to night positions in Lam Xuan West and called in supporting arms on the enemy in Nhi Ha.

On 3 May, while BLT 2/4 and the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines had a relatively quiet time in the Dai Do sector, the Army battalion again fought a see-saw battle with the North Vietnamese in Nhi Ha. After Marine artillery softened the enemy defenses, the 3d Battalion launched another attack into Nhi Ha. The troops recovered the bodies of the four members of the battalion reported missing the night before. About noon, the enemy struck back with the first of three counterattacks. While repulsing the attacks, the Army unit fell back to permit Marine air once more to hit the enemy defenses. The airstrikes were accurate but North Vietnamese antiaircraft guns downed one of the Chance Vaught F-8 Crusaders, killing the pilot. Although unable to take Nhi Ha and returning again to their night positions at Lam Xuan West, the Army battalion sustained relatively light casualties during the day, 1 dead and 7 wounded while accounting for 67 of the enemy.⁵⁴

The fighting at Nhi Ha the following day was a repetition of that of the 3d. Once more, Marine air and artillery bombarded the enemy in Nhi Ha. At 0936, the Army troops again attacked, but only to find themselves once more enmeshed in the North Vietnamese field fortifications and bunkers. The 3d Battalion spent another night in defensive positions in Lam Xuan West. At 0940 on the morning of 5 May, after the usual air and artillery bombardment, the 3d Battalion again moved into the attack. Encountering almost no resistance, the battalion reported at 1135, "Nhi Ha was secured." The Army soldiers found 64 North Vietnamese bodies in the hamlet, all killed by supporting arms. All told, the 3d Battalion suffered 16 dead and 33 wounded while it estimated that the North Vietnamese lost more than 200 men in the three-day struggle for Nhi Ha.⁵⁵

In the meantime, the fighting had shifted westward. After a short hiatus in the Dai Do area, on the morning of 5 May, Lieutenant Colonel Jarman's 1st Battalion, 3d Marines attacked north from Thuong Do towards Truc Kinh, a distance of 1,200 meters to the northwest. The 2d ARVN regiment was to protect the battalion's western flank. With Companies C and D in the lead and Company B following in trace, the Marine battalion reached its first objective, the hamlet of Som Soi, about 300 meters southeast of Truc Kinh, encountering only token resistance. Within a short time, however, about 1130, the Marine battalion came under

heavy fire from Truc Kinh and some scattered fire from the southeast. Calling in artillery and fixed-wing airstrikes, especially against Truc Kinh, the battalion fought its way through Som Soi.⁵⁶

At this point, about 1250 on the 5th, the North Vietnamese launched a counterattack from Truc Kinh with Company D on the eastern flank bearing the brunt of the assault. Lieutenant Colonel Jarman then ordered Company C to swing around to the right to contain the enemy attack while Company B screened the movement. This maneuver, however, exposed the battalion's western flank since the 2d ARVN Regiment's attack to the southwest had already stalled and the South Vietnamese were in no position to support the Marines. According to Jarman, an aerial observer radioed him that "500 Charlies were preparing to flank our position."⁵⁷ Colonel Hull, the 3d Marines commander, upon learning of the situation, immediately requested reinforcements. The 3d Division released Companies I and M, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines to the operational control of the 3d Marines. Marine helicopters brought the two companies into a landing zone near Thuong Do. Despite the loss of one helicopter, the two 4th Marines companies quickly advanced to the northwest to provide protection for Jarman's western flank. After consolidating his positions in a defensive perimeter established by Companies I and M in a tree line, about 1,000 meters to the south of Truc Kinh, Lieutenant Colonel Jarman described the situation "relatively routine" as Marine air and artillery continued to pound the enemy.⁵⁸ About 1800, the North Vietnamese broke contact.

On the morning of the 6th, Companies C and D again reoccupied Soi Son without meeting any resistance. While Company D provided protective fire, Company C then advanced upon Truc Kinh. By 1400 that afternoon, the 1st Battalion had secured the latter hamlet. Most of the North Vietnamese had fled except for the dead from the previous fighting, and three NVA soldiers who surrendered to the Marines. In the two-day action for Truc Kinh, the Marines reported 173 of the enemy dead, captured 3 prisoners, and recovered 75 rifles and 19 crew-served weapons. The Marines sustained casualties of 15 dead and 71 wounded.

While Lieutenant Colonel Jarman's command enjoyed a relatively uneventful day on the 6th, about five miles to the northeast, the U.S. Army 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry's Nhi Ha sector again became active. The North Vietnamese ambushed the battalion's Company A which was conducting a sweep

northwest of Nhi Ha. Before the Army unit could disengage under cover of air and artillery support and return to Nhi Ha, it lost 5 men dead and 17 wounded. Company A reported another 14 soldiers missing. Two of the missing returned to the company's lines that evening, and the battalion recovered the bodies of 11 of the others. One soldier remained on the rolls as missing in action.⁵⁹

With the continuing contact with elements of the 320th by the Army battalion in the Nhi Ha area and by the ARVN 2d Regiment, whose 4th Battalion on the 6th engaged a North Vietnamese unit just east of Route 1, Major General Tompkins decided to insert the two-battalion 2d Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division into the fight to exploit the situation. Earlier he had asked General Rosson for and received permission to redeploy the brigade if needed from the Scotland II area of operations near Khe Sanh into the Dong Ha sector. With few other reserves available to him, the Air Cavalry brigade provided Tompkins, not only additional troops, but a force, with sufficient helicopters, "ideally configured for operations against a retreating enemy force operating in small formations" and to "patrol large areas effectively and move forces quickly to exploit sightings and contacts."⁶⁰

At 1715 on 6 May, the first battalion of the brigade, the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, under Lieutenant Colonel C. E. Jordan, landed in a landing zone about 3,000 meters east of the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines in Truc Kinh. Temporarily, General Tompkins placed the Cavalry battalion under the operational control of Colonel Hull of the 3d Marines. From 7–8 May, the 1st Cavalry battalion made a careful sweep northwest toward the Marine battalion. At Truc Kinh, Lieutenant Colonel Jarman's Marines continued to patrol, finding a few more enemy dead and capturing three more prisoners. On the morning of the 9th, the 2d Brigade of the Air Cavalry under Army Colonel Robert N. McKinnon, with the 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, arrived and took over the sector. The 3d Marines relinquished operational control of the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, and Lieutenant Colonel Jarman's battalion returned to its former operational area south of the Cua Viet River.⁶¹

On the morning of the 9th, the 2d Brigade then began Operation Concordia Square in an area of operations carved out of that of the 2d ARVN Regiment, sandwiched between the ARVN on the west and the 3d Marines in Operation Napoleon/Saline to the east. Its heaviest action of the operation actually occurred

on that very day. About 5,000 meters southeast of Gio Linh, about 0800, a North Vietnamese force heavily engaged two companies of the 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, cutting off one and preventing the other from coming to its assistance. The brigade quickly deployed units of its 2d Battalion into blocking positions north of the action and ordered the remaining two companies of the 1st Battalion to relieve the embattled companies. In the fast-moving action supported by Marine fixed-wing aircraft and helicopter gunships, enemy gunners shot down one UH-1H helicopter, the Army version of the Bell "Huey," and hit eight others. By 1300, the North Vietnamese had disengaged leaving behind an estimated 80 enemy dead. The Army troopers sustained casualties of 16 dead and 52 wounded.⁶²

Except for scattered action in Concordia Square, and one large engagement on 10 May north of Nhi Ha involving the 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry, the 320th Division was no longer engaging the allied forces. In the action on the 10th, Company C, 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry in predawn darkness spotted about 300 enemy troops moving toward its positions. The company pulled back all of its night patrols and called in continuous illumination and artillery upon the NVA. The enemy answered with artillery from north of the DMZ and mortars, and then about 0600 launched a ground assault against the entire battalion front. With the support of fixed-wing aircraft, helicopter gunships, artillery, and naval gunfire, the Army troops broke the back of the enemy attack in a one-sided battle. By 1500, all enemy resistance had ended. The 3d Battalion suffered only 1 soldier dead and 16 wounded. It reported killing 159 of the enemy, took 2 prisoners, and recovered 55 rifles and 18 crew-served weapons.⁶³

After the one assault on Nhi Ha on the 10th, rather than attempting to infiltrate south to close the Cua Viet and possibly attack Dong Ha, the 320th was now breaking into small groups who were trying their best to make their way north into the Demilitarized Zone. Operation Concordia Square ended on 17 May. From 9–17 May, the 2d Air Cavalry Brigade reported enemy casualties of 349 dead while sustaining 28 killed and 117 wounded. Both the Air Cavalry Brigade and the Americal's 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry returned to their base camp at Camp Evans. The enemy offensive had petered out.⁶⁴

With what appeared to be the end of the "most awesome battle by the standards of the Vietnamese War," General Tompkins asked his operations staff to



Photo courtesy of Col Francis I. Fenton, USMC (Ret)

U.S. Army LtGen William B. Rosson, CG Prov Corps, officiates at a 3d Marine Division change of command ceremony. Standing behind Rosson is MajGen Raymond G. Davis, left, who is relieving MajGen Rathvon McC. Tompkins, right, as the commanding general of the division.

come up with a statistical summary of the action since 30 April. According to the division account, in an 18-day period, the allies killed over 2,100 of the enemy (including 221 by air). Perhaps more reliable and indicative figures were the 41 prisoners captured by the allies and the recovery of more than 500 enemy weapons including 132 crew-served weapons. The cost, however, had been high. In the fighting, the Army and Marine units under the operational control of the 3d Marine Division suffered losses of 233 killed, over 800 wounded, and 1 missing soldier from the 3d Battalion, 21st Infantry. Task Force Clearwater took casualties of 15 dead and 22 wounded, while the ARVN lost 42 dead and 124 wounded. With the extensive bloodletting, Major General Tompkins "had good reason to believe . . . that the 320th NVA Division would not pose a serious threat to the allied positions along the DMZ for some time to come." General Tompkins also had received word that he was about to relinquish his command.⁶⁵

The Second Offensive

Contrary to General Tompkins' expectations, the 320th was to come south again and the results were to be much the same, but even more one-sided than the previous attempt. Within the brief interlude between the two enemy thrusts, the enemy had been relatively quiescent except for an artillery attack on the 3d Marine Division base area at Dong Ha. On 14 May, a North Vietnamese artillery barrage exploded there about 110 tons of ammunition, killing 1 Marine and wounding 15. The division's Kentucky and Napoleon/Saline sectors, however, remained relatively inactive through 21 May.⁶⁶

On 21 May, there was a sort of a musical chairs shift throughout the Marine Corps Vietnam command structure. Major General William J. Van Ryzin, the III MAF Deputy Commander, received a promotion to lieutenant general and became the Chief of Staff to the Commandant at Headquarters, Marine Corps in

Washington.* Since Major General Tompkins was the next senior Marine ranking officer in country, Lieutenant General Cushman, the III MAF commander, selected Tompkins to become his new deputy. With the concurrence of the Commandant, General Chapman, Cushman appointed Marine Major General Raymond G. Davis, the deputy commander of Prov Corps, to take Tompkins place as commander of the 3d Marine Division.

On 21 May, in a brief change of command ceremony at Dong Ha, Major General Davis, a native of Georgia and holder of the Medal of Honor from the Korean War, assumed command of the 3d Marine Division. From his former vantage point at Prov Corps, Davis had become impressed with the airmobile tactics of the 1st Air Cavalry Division during Operation Pegasus. As one Army officer remembered, the senior members of Rosson's Prov Corps staff would "take turns having dinner with him every night in the headquarters mess, giving him our ideas on mobile warfare, and during the day we flew around with him." Davis was well aware of the purposes of the attentions of the Prov Corps staff. As he declared later, he had known the Prov Corps commander for some time and when Davis arrived at Prov Corps headquarters, Rosson began "orienting me towards . . . the effectiveness of forces [an euphemism for the airmobile tactics]." Davis believed that the 3d Marine Division had become tied down to its fixed positions and too defense-minded. As he confided to Marine Brigadier General John R. Chaisson on Westmoreland's staff, it was his opinion that the 3d Division earlier in May at Dai Do and afterwards had "missed a great opportunity" and allowed the North Vietnamese to "get away."^{67*}

*General Van Ryzin later recalled that he received a telephone call from General Chapman, the Commandant, who had already spoken to General Cushman. The Commandant told Van Ryzin that "I'm going to ask you to come back as my Chief of Staff. I'm going to give you exactly two hours to say yes or no." General Van Ryzin talked the matter over with General Cushman who told him that, "I was stupid if I didn't take it." Van Ryzin accepted the position. LtGen William J. Van Ryzin intvw, 2Apr75, p. 218 (Oral HistColl, MCHC). In his comments, General Van Ryzin observed that he "was still becoming acquainted with the situation [in Vietnam] when I returned to the U.S." LtGen William J. Van Ryzin, Comments on draft, n.d. [Oct94] (Vietnam Comment File).

**General Rosson years later observed: "Unhappily, a substantial portion of the 320th was able to elude us, reorganize and return in a matter of days. General Davis, who had followed the action as my Deputy, harbored the view that the 320th should have been destroyed south of the DMZ." Gen William B. Rosson, Comments on draft, dtd 27Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File).

General Davis was to have his "opportunity" almost as soon as he took over the 3d Marine Division. The 320th NVA had once more left the sanctuary of the DMZ and entered Quang Tri Province. As Davis later stated, "It was gone just nine days and came back to welcome me the night I took command" Although not expecting the enemy division to make another foray so soon after the first, this time the Marines were ready for the 320th.⁶⁸

In what the 3d Marine Division listed as the first phase of the new offensive, the North Vietnamese division moved into the Operation Kentucky Leatherneck Square sector northwest of Dong Ha halfway between Con Thien and Gio Linh. This sector had been somewhat quiet since 8 May when the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines had overrun an NVA regimental headquarters, but had sustained heavy casualties during an enemy artillery bombardment.⁶⁹ During this lull, Captain Matthew G. McTiernan assumed command of Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines. He recalled that the Marine battalions during this period would shift boundaries between A-3 and Con Thien to confuse the North Vietnamese who had the tendency of working the unit boundary lines. On the morning of 22 May, his company had the mission of establishing "a series of ambushes along the old AO [area of operations] line." The company left the perimeter about 0400 that morning with his 3d Platoon in the lead. Just southwest of the A-3 Strong Point, the company encountered what it first thought was a small enemy patrol. The Marines soon realized that the enemy was in at least company strength and called for reinforcements. McTiernan then asked for air support and received helicopter gunship support "which proved too much for the NVA." According to the Marine captain, the enemy had been on the move, had no prepared positions, and were easy targets for air: "We had caught the NVA unit cold."⁷⁰

In the meantime, a Company A, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines patrol ran into another enemy force just east of Con Thien. Given the intensity of the enemy resistance supported by artillery, Colonel Richard B. Smith, the 9th Marines commander, assumed that the North Vietnamese had infiltrated possibly a battalion if not a larger force into his sector. While the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines reinforced from A-3 and the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines attacked east from Con Thien, Smith attempted to exploit the contact. He asked General Davis for and received operational control from the 4th Marines of the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines. Marine helicopters landed the battalion into blocking positions to

the south of the contact. At the same time, Colonel Smith ordered the helicopter lift of his 1st Battalion, 9th Marines into other blocking positions to the north.

During the next two days while the enemy sought to disengage, the 9th Marines with 12 companies attempted to place a cordon around the NVA forces. When either of the two assault battalions, the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines or the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, found itself in too close to an action, "the unit involved backed off and assaulted the NVA with massive supporting arms." According to a 9th Marines account: "On one occasion, the encircled enemy attempted to escape across the trace; however, artillery . . . , gunships, fixed wing and tanks were brought to bear . . . with devastating effect." By noon on the 24th, the fight was over in the 9th Marines sector. Since the morning of the 22d, the Marines had sustained about 100 casualties, 23 dead and 75 wounded and evacuated, but had reported killing 225 of the North Vietnamese and captured 3 prisoners.⁷¹

On 25 May, the flats above Dong Ha in both the 2d ARVN regimental sector and the Napoleon/Saline area again became the centers of action. That morning Company E, BLT 2/4 encountered an NVA force in about battalion strength near Nhi Ha, while the ARVN about 2,000 meters above Dong Ha ran into a similarly sized force. Once more the Marines rapidly reinforced both over land and by helicopter-borne forces. In the Nhi Ha sector, Colonel Hull, the 3d Marines commander, ordered the helilift of Company H BLT 2/4 into blocking positions to the south while Company E attacked the hamlet from the north under a rolling barrage. In fighting that lasted all day, the two Marine companies together with supporting artillery and air reported killing 238 of the enemy. Marine casualties were also heavy, 18 dead and 33 wounded and evacuated. To the southwest, the 2d ARVN Regiment in their contact, near Thuong Nghia, just west of the former Dai Do perimeter, repulsed the enemy attack, and claimed killing 122 of the enemy.⁷²

On the 26th, concerned that the North Vietnamese 320th was again attempting to cut the Cua Viet or even strike at Dong Ha itself, General Davis attempted to cordon off the North Vietnamese units. He ordered the helilift of the 1st and 2d Battalions, 9th Marines into blocking positions west of Nhi Ha and placed the two battalions under the operational control of the 3d Marines. At the same time, he ordered Colonel Smith, the 9th Marines commander, to move the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines and the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines overland to exploit the ARVN contact near Thuong Nghia.⁷³

In the southern cordon on the 26th, the two Marine battalions, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines and 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, formed blocking positions about 3,000 meters north of Thuong Nghia. The 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, in the vicinity of Truc Kinh, twice encountered resistance from North Vietnamese in entrenched defenses. In the first clash, about 1300, the battalion ran into a force of about 100 enemy troops. After first contact, the Marines pulled back "to allow heavy pounding of enemy positions by air and artillery." The battalion sustained casualties of 10 Marines dead and 12 wounded. At the same time, it captured 5 prisoners and reported killing 56 of the enemy.⁷⁴

In the second action later that afternoon, about 1630, Company K, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines outside of Truc Kinh came under intensive small arms and automatic weapons fire. Tanks attached to the infantry attempted to reinforce the company, but became bogged down in the rice paddies. An aerial observer called in close air support so that the company could withdraw before last light. Captain McTiernan, whose Company I protected Company K's left flank, recalled that during this action, his troops "saw a long column of troops moving out of a small hamlet located 200 yards to our left front." Apparently the enemy was attempting to reinforce their units engaging Company K. With assurances that the column was NVA, Company I opened fire with devastating effect in what Captain McTiernan described "as target practice . . . In the course of ten or fifteen minutes the entire column was destroyed." Still the 3d Battalion had not gone unscathed, Company K sustained 23 wounded and reported 5 missing in action. During the same day, the ARVN about a 1,000 meters to the north of Thuong Nghia claimed to have killed 110 of the enemy while suffering casualties of 2 dead and 7 wounded.⁷⁵

On the 27th, the 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, reinforced by the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, took its objectives, meeting only scattered enemy resistance. In Truc Kinh, the Marines recovered the bodies of the five men from Company K reported missing the day before. Throughout the day, the Marine units in the southern cordon killed about 28 of the enemy while sustaining only four wounded. For the next two days, the Marines in the two battalions together with the ARVN maintained the cordon subjecting the North Vietnamese units between them to "massive fixed-wing and general support ordnance . . ." Finally on the 30th, enemy resistance broke and the two battalions "swept through the area," taking 18 prisoners and recovering 23

weapons. For the days of the cordon, 26–30 May, the 9th Marines reported that the two battalions killed a total of 161 of the enemy, captured 26 prisoners, and retrieved over 100 enemy weapons, including 29 crew-served weapons. Marine casualties were also heavy; 41 dead and 119 wounded. The ARVN during their participation in the southern cordon operation claimed to have killed 384 of the enemy and sustained 19 killed and 45 wounded.⁷⁶

During the same period, the 3d Marines in the northern cordon sector around Nhi Ha encircled a North Vietnamese battalion in the hamlet of Lai An, about 2,500 meters northwest of Nhi Ha. While BLT 2/4 and the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines established blocking positions, the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines reinforced by the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines attacked Lai An. Using 11 companies to form the cordon, the 3d Marines finally secured the hamlet on 30 May. Again the price was high. In the taking of Lai An, the Marines sustained casualties of over 20 dead and 200 wounded. From 27–30 May, the 3d Marines reported the finding of 90 bodies and the capture of 8 prisoners in the fight for Lai An.⁷⁷

The “second” battle for Dong Ha was over. Once more the 320th NVA Division had taken heavy casualties and retreated north of the DMZ. In the two phases of the second offensive, the 3d Marine Division reported killing over 770 of the enemy. Combined with the number estimated killed by the ARVN, the enemy division would have lost more than 1,000 dead from the period 22 May to the end of the month, not including the 61 prisoners captured by the allies. Allied casualties including 112 dead totaled 558.⁷⁸

Thus in the two offensives mounted by the 320th NVA Division, the North Vietnamese had lost over 3,000 troops. While American casualties had been heavy, their total of dead and wounded was about half of the reported number of North Vietnamese killed. What was even more apparent was that the second offensive was even more futile than the first. While the North Vietnamese may have sustained fewer casualties in the second offensive, they also fought much less effectively. According to the 3d Marines, the enemy troops in the later encounters showed poorer discipline and while well-equipped were less experienced and more willing to surrender. General Davis related that one captured North Vietnamese sergeant stated that of the 90 men in his company, 62 were new. One frightened enemy soldier captured near Lai An told the Marines that his unit lost 200 out of 300 men since crossing the Ben Hai River. In any event,

the 320th remained out of action in the DMZ war for the next two months.⁷⁹

In many respects, questions still remain about the intent of the enemy. Obviously, the thrust of the 320th was part of the overall NVA so-called “mini-Tet offensive” that the enemy attempted in May to initiate country-wide, a somewhat “poor man’s imitation” of the January-February Tet offensive. More than the earlier offensive, except for increased fighting in the capital city of Saigon, the North Vietnamese May offensive was largely limited to attacks by fire at allied bases and acts of terrorism in the hamlets and villages. In I Corps, while the North Vietnamese may have attempted to cut the Cua Viet, they did not or were not able this time to coordinate that attempt with attacks against the major cities of Quang Tri, Hue, and Da Nang. Moreover, the 320th apparently mistakenly fired early upon the shipping on the Cua Viet, giving away its presence and triggering the Marine response, before all of its units were in position. After once engaged, while showing tenacity, the North Vietnamese division revealed little imagination and an inability to counter the American advantages in manpower, equipment, and supporting arms.

For its part, the 3d Marine Division made several changes in the way it was fighting the DMZ war. Immediately upon taking command of the division, General Davis issued a directive to reduce the number of units manning the strongpoints. In Davis’ words, “battalion positions . . . immediately . . . [became] company positions.” For example, in the 9th Marines sector, one battalion was responsible for all the strongpoints with one company positioned at each. The other three battalions were “‘swing’ units” to reinforce a developing battle using helicopter assault and cordon tactics.⁸⁰

Some controversy has arisen over the question about the 3d Marine Division tactics in the earlier offensive. If the division had used more mobile operations and attempted to reinforce Lieutenant Colonel Weise’s BLT 2/4 at Dai Do would it have destroyed or trapped more of the 320th? This is one of the questions that may never be answered and it is of course much easier to answer with hindsight after the event. In all fairness to Major General Tompkins and his staff, his attention and that of his command had been directed towards Khe Sanh since the beginning of the year. He had inherited the barrier and Dyemarker situation from his predecessor and was under constant MACV pressure to maintain and man these defenses. Even if Dyemarker and Khe Sanh were not factors, General Tompkins at

the same time as Dai Do had good reason to believe that the attacks on Nhi Ha to the northeast and at Cam Phu to the southwest may have been the main effort of the 320th. With the beginning of the drawdown of forces from the Scotland area of operations, General Davis had more freedom of action to implement a more mobile concept in the 3d Marine Division sector, a strategy that the Marines had recommended in the DMZ area since late 1966 and early 1967. At that time, instead of the barrier, the Marines had recommended "a mobile defense by an adequate force—say one division give or take a battalion . . ." Different circumstances provided different opportunities.^{81*}

*Many of the reviewers of this chapter still had strong opinions about the differences between the earlier and later tactics of the division. Captain McTiernan, for example, wrote that, "the decisive change in tactics initiated by General Davis" was the most important factor in the defeat of the NVA offensive. Capt Matthew G. McTiernan, Comments on draft, n.d. [Jan 1995] (Vietnam Comment File). Colonel Max McQuown argued that prior to Davis assuming command there were "a myriad of static defensive positions of little tactical value. These positions and the rigid control the Division exercised over every combat unit, fragmented battalions, reduced their combat capability, and

severely limited their freedom of action. Thus, after soundly defeating the NVA 'Tet' offensive the initiative passed to the NVA by default in the 3d Marine Division TAOR." McQuown Comments. On the other hand, Colonel Vaughn R. Stuart, who served on the division staff and as a regimental commander later under General Davis, observed that although members of the division "knew very well that we were not mobile, that we were not carrying the war to the enemy . . .", General Tompkins did what he could to change the status quo." He blamed Tompkins' problems, in part, on the factor that the 3d Marine Division commander could not obtain enough helicopters from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing. Col Vaughn R. Stuart, Comments on draft, dtd 20Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). See the discussion in Chapter 25 on this last subject. Colonel William M. Cryan, who was the 3d Marine Division G-3 under General Davis, agreed that the division "was stymied by Dyemarker and fixed bases . . .," and credits General Davis for getting "the division moving." Col William M. Cryan, Comments on draft, 12Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). Colonel William H. Dabney, who served on the division staff under both Generals Tompkins and Davis, agreed with the statement in the text that "different circumstances provided different opportunities." He also declared that intelligence "was far from perfect the first time around, and that General Davis had the benefit of General Tompkins' experience for the second round." Dabney concluded, however, that the "*difference in style*" [emphasis in the original] between Davis and Tompkins may also have affected the outcome of Round II." Col William H. Dabney, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec94] (Vietnam Comment File).

CHAPTER 16

Khe Sanh: Final Operations and Evacuation 16 April–11 July 1968

*To Stay or Not to Stay—The “Walking Dead”—Operation Scotland II—Operation Robin
Razing Khe Sanh: Operation Charlie*

To Stay or Not to Stay

General Westmoreland originally had ordered the defense of Khe Sanh as a block to enemy infiltration along Route 9 and as a possible “jump-off point” for a planned invasion of Laos.¹ By the end of the siege, the Paris negotiations with the North Vietnamese had ended all thoughts of expanding the war into Laos. With the increased availability of additional mobile forces following the defeat of the enemy’s Tet offensive, Westmoreland faced an entirely new tactical situation. As he recorded later:

It was clear . . . that the base had outlived its usefulness. We now had the troops and helicopters to control the area, . . . and we had the logistics and a secure forward base at Ca Lu to support these operations.²

In light of these new developments, Lieutenant General Cushman, the III MAF commander, and Army Lieutenant General William B. Rosson, the Provisional Corps commander, pressed for the evacuation of Khe Sanh immediately. According to General Rosson, he had prepared a plan which General Cushman had endorsed and that he thought had the tacit approval of General Westmoreland. Rosson had proposed the immediate redeployment of the 1st Air Cavalry Division to operation Delaware, and the “progressive deployment eastward” of the 3d Marine Division units. As he recalled, he talked personally by telephone with Westmoreland and told the MACV commander that the Marine and ARVN units would remain at Khe Sanh only to ensure security for the “removal of supplies” during the proposed “inactivation of the base.” In Rosson’s opinion, “General Westmoreland understood the plan that General Cushman and I had agreed upon,” and offered no objection.³

On 15 April, this understanding, if there was such an understanding, fell apart at a commander’s conference that General Rosson hosted at his headquarters at Phu Bai. Rosson had called the meeting which originally was to include the 3d Marine Division and 1st Air Cavalry Division commanders and various staff members “to finalize the plan and issue orders.” As a courtesy, Rosson invited his immediate superior,

General Cushman, who in turn had invited General Westmoreland. The Provisional Corps commander remembered that he had just finished outlining the concept and had asked for comments when: “General Westmoreland—to Cushman’s and my own surprise and embarrassment—stated that Pegasus would not be terminated.” While permitting the greater part of the 1st Air Cavalry Division to redeploy to Operation Delaware, one brigade of the Air Cavalry and Marine and ARVN units would continue “to comb the area” using Khe Sanh as their base of operations. Any decision to curtail “these activities,” dismantle the base, or redeploy the remaining forces “would await further developments.” General Westmoreland later would say that he basically agreed with Rosson’s plan, “but not its timing.” General Rosson remained puzzled: “In essence, I either misunderstood General Westmoreland’s approval, or he had second thoughts. . . . Why he did not communicate his disagreement to us prior to the conference continues to perplex me.” In any event, while Operation Pegasus did officially end on 15 April, U.S. units would continue to operate in and around Khe Sanh, for the time being, under the operational name of Scotland II.^{4*}

**Like the meeting on 8 March (See Chapters 8 and 14) the participants had different interpretations about General Westmoreland’s demeanor at the April meeting. According to Marine Brigadier General John R. Chaisson, who headed the MACV Combat Operations Center, when General Westmoreland learned that General Cushman, the III MAF commander, and General Rosson, the Prov Corps commander, planned to evacuate the base, “Westy lowered the boom. He was so mad he wouldn’t stay around and talk with them. Instead he told me what he wanted and left me to push it with Rosson and Cushman.” BGen Chaisson ltr to Mrs. Chaisson, dtd 17Apr68 as quoted in Ronald H. Spector, *After Tet, The Bloodiest Year in Vietnam* (N.Y., N.Y.: The Free Press, 1993), p. 129. On the other hand, General Rosson wrote: “General Westmoreland certainly did not ‘lower the boom’ on me when he learned of the plan during our telephone conference. Nor did he do so during the commanders conference. While he was incisively firm in expressing himself on that occasion, he did not exhibit anger. Moreover, he remained after the conference for a short time to converse informally with various commanders, key staff officers, Cushman and myself. I frankly do not remember John’s [Chaisson] remaining to ‘push it with Rosson and Cushman.’” According to Rosson, he rather recalled “resuming the conference after General Westmoreland’s departure to forge a new course of action and revise the orders.” Gen William B. Rosson, USA, Comments on draft, dtd 29May95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Rosson Comments, May95.

The "Walking Dead"

When the 3d Marine Division once more prepared to assume control of operations at Khe Sanh with the end of Operation Pegasus, General Tompkins, the 3d Marine Division commander had sent his Assistant Division Commander, Brigadier General Jacob E. Glick, to command the forces there. General Glick several years later remembered that his orders were to "close the base down. . . . I went up with a minimum staff with instructions to just hold on, without mounting operations . . . Then the rules changed" after General Westmoreland reversed the original decision.⁵

Glick's command, not surprisingly, was designated Task Force (TF) Glick and included the 1st Marines; the 26th Marines; the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines; and the 2d Brigade of the 1st Air Cavalry Division, which was operating east of Khe Sanh. The 1st Marines began relocating to Khe Sanh from Ca Lu, relieving battalions of the 26th Marines, which, in turn, started to redeploy out of the Khe Sanh sector. On 16 April, Colonel Bruce F. Meyers, the 26th Marines commander, still had one artillery and five infantry battalions under his control and was also responsible for Operation Scotland II, which had just begun. Meyers reported directly to General Glick and oversaw the relief of his battalions by those of the 1st Marines. Lieutenant Colonel John J. H. Cahill's 1st Battalion, 9th Marines remained at the base as part of TF Glick and continued offensive operations west of the combat base.⁶

At 0700 on 16 April, Captain Henry D. Banks led two reinforced platoons of Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines on a patrol southwest of the battalion's perimeter on Hill 689 and a small adjoining hill. Banks ordered the company to halt at 1000 and sent two squads to search for signs of the enemy on a nearby ridge that was covered with four-to-six-foot-high elephant grass. The squad came under small arms and mortar fire, then fell back and reported two Marines killed.* Banks deployed the company with the 1st Platoon establishing a base of fire and the 2d Platoon

attacking up the ridge against what he believed to be the enemy's left flank.⁷

First Lieutenant Michael P. Hayden led the 2d Platoon up the north end of the ridge and against the enemy position, but the North Vietnamese, firing from well-concealed bunkers, drove the Marines to the ground. In rapid succession, first Hayden and then his platoon sergeant were killed. The 2d Platoon halted in the deep grass at the fringe of the North Vietnamese bunker complex and returned fire, but with little effect.

Captain Banks ordered the 2d Platoon to fall back so that he could call for supporting arms, but word reached him that dead and wounded Marines still lay within 10 meters of the bunker complex, under the enemy's guns. The intense enemy fire continued and casualties mounted to 10 dead and 20 wounded.* Banks reported to Lieutenant Colonel Cahill that he was engaged with an estimated North Vietnamese squad in heavily fortified positions, then refused Cahill's offer of help. He again tried to evacuate casualties and withdraw, but was unable to do so. Cahill alerted Companies C and D.⁹

At noon, Banks reconsidered and asked for help. Two platoons of Captain Lawrence Himmer's Company C moved out first, with Lieutenant Colonel Cahill accompanying them. On reaching the scene of the action, Cahill found Company A on the north end of the ridge, with heavy casualties and unable to move. He ordered Himmer to attack from the south. Colonel Meyers, monitoring the radio reports from the regimental command post, asked Cahill if he needed help, but like Banks earlier, Cahill refused.^{10**}

**Colonel Meyers noted that there were problems with message transmission. Lieutenant Colonel Cahill at 1320 had informed Colonel Meyers that he was committing his two other companies to the action. Because of the necessity of the various radio relays, Meyers did not receive this message until 1543. Within two minutes of receiving this message, Meyers contacted Cahill to "request his current status and to ask if he needed any additional assistance. Cahill . . . declined the proffered additional support." Colonel Meyers also had more than the predicament of Company A on his mind. He recalled that on 16 April, "we received three direct hits of 122mm rockets which set the ASP [ammunition supply point] three on fire." Meyers observed that, "when you are the regimental commander and one of your main ammo dumps within your perimeter is hit, burning, and blowing up, it became more than a line entry in the command chronology!" Meyers Comments and Copy of Statement of Col Bruce F. Meyers to Board for Correction of Naval and Military Records, n.d. [1968], attached to Meyers Comments, hereafter Meyers Statement, Meyers Comments.

*Colonel Meyers recalled that the action actually began when a Marine fire team about 1030 or 1100 "ran into a reverse slope horse-shoe shaped NVA bunker complex." In this contact one of the members of the team was killed and two others wounded as "they crested the ridge." Col Bruce F. Meyers, Comments on draft, dtd 20Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Meyers Comments.

Company C deployed on line and advanced up the ridge against what appeared to be the enemy's right flank. As the Marines approached the bunkers, enemy fire broke out from another hidden fortified position on their left flank. Within moments, Himmer, both platoon commanders, a platoon sergeant, and several squad leaders fell with wounds. The acting company executive officer, First Lieutenant William C. Connelly, assumed command. An artillery fire mission on the bunker complex to the company's left resulted in friendly fire impacting within 50 meters of the Marines, so the artillery forward observer ended the mission.¹¹

At 1500, Companies A and C were both in desperate straits. Casualties were high, including many unit leaders, and the Marines were nearly immobilized in the elephant grass by the intense enemy fire from two mutually supporting bunker complexes and from nearby mortars which steadily pounded the slopes of the ridge. Nearby, Company D was helping Company A to evacuate the wounded who had been able to crawl away. Cahill moved toward the LZ, suffering three wounds along the way, and ordered Captain John W. Cargile's Company D to deploy along Company A's right flank, then attack across the ridge from northwest to southeast.¹²

Heavy casualties had by now rendered Company A ineffective, and Captain Banks was concentrating on attempts to evacuate casualties as Company D began its attack. Cargile's men advanced through the grass, receiving heavy and accurate sniper fire which dropped four Marines with single shots to the head. The deep grass and the profusion of units and individuals on the hill firing weapons left Cargile's men uncertain of the enemy's exact location and dispositions. Although Company D continued to move forward, progress was painfully slow and casualties mounted.¹³

At about 1730, Banks was seriously wounded and Second Lieutenant Francis B. Lovely, Jr., assumed command of Company A. Cahill learned by radio of increasing casualties in Company D and ordered his companies to evacuate their wounded and withdraw, leaving their dead. Having assumed command of the battalion in the field only two weeks before, Cahill was not aware of General Tompkins' standing

orders emphasizing that all KIAs should be evacuated.^{14*}

It was 0300 before the last company closed on the battalion perimeter, and another hour before a casualty count reached Cahill showing 20 killed and 20 missing. The battalion continued taking musters and comparing statements of participants which soon reduced the number of missing to 15.¹⁵

At 0630 on the morning of the 17th, several Marines heard the voice of Corporal Hubert H. Hunnicutt III, calling across the valley from the ridge where the battle had taken place. Two squads moved into the valley and shouted back to him, attempting to pinpoint his location. After hearing two shots near where they thought Hunnicutt was located, the patrol no longer heard his voice.¹⁶

A few hours later, after Cahill had presented Meyers and General Glick his plan to recover the bodies on 19 April, an air observer (AO) reported seeing a live Marine about 50 meters from the enemy bunkers. Volunteers from the battalion boarded two Boeing CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters for a rescue attempt. One helicopter held a fire team and the other a body recovery detail. When the first helicopter landed atop the ridge, it crushed an enemy soldier with the tail ramp and the fire team ran out shooting. Four North Vietnamese who popped up from fighting holes fell dead immediately. Others surrounding the landing zone poured fire into the helicopter as the Marines quickly searched for the survivor. Finding only dead bodies which had been decapitated and disemboweled, the fire team ran back on board the badly shot up CH-46, which flew 1,000 meters back to Hill 689, then crash landed with about 20 hits in the engine. An AO watching the rescue attempt reported that the search party had missed the live Marine who could still be seen waving

*Several years later, General Glick declared that "the division policy on recovery of MIAs and KIAs was, to my mind, not clearly defined, because in the previous months that I had been there, there had been a general understanding that the forces should not risk additional deaths and casualties unnecessarily to recover KIAs, but that all reasonable effort should be made to recover MIAs. . . . yes, we always recovered KIAs if we could. But, it definitely was considered not right to go into high-risk areas if it was a known KIA. . . . If the person might still be alive, then it would justify to take some risks with other Marines." The general stated that Colonel Meyers of the 26th Marines "was fairly cautious about ground operations to recover people that were probably KIAs." BGen Jacob E. Glick intvw, 20 Jun and 11 Jul 89, pp. 10-11 (Oral Hist Coll, MCHC).

from a shell hole only meters from where the helicopter had landed.^{17*}

Shortly after the failed rescue attempt, an Army helicopter pilot using the call sign "Blue Max 48" volunteered to make another try. With Army helicopter gunships blasting enemy positions atop the ridge, Blue Max 48 sat down near the bunker complex and a crewman leaped out and carried the wounded Marine on board. The helicopter then delivered him directly to the field hospital. Lieutenant Colonel Cahill logically assumed that the Marine who was rescued was the same Marine, Hunnicutt, who had called across the valley earlier in the day. Only later would he learn that the rescued Marine was not Hunnicutt, but a member of Company C named Private First Class G. Panyaninac.¹⁸

Certain that no live Marines remained on the ridge, Cahill and his staff set to work once more on a plan to recover the remains of those killed in the engagement of the 16th. Attack aircraft bombed the objective through the night of 17 April and the early morning hours of the 18th. But at about 0630, 18 April, Marines on the battalion perimeter once again reported hearing Corporal Hunnicutt calling for help. Lieutenant Colonel Cahill directed that a patrol be dispatched to rescue Hunnicutt and he informed Colonel Meyers of his plans. Meyers approved, but ordered that the patrol not proceed further than 500 meters from the perimeter because the 26th Marines was scheduled to pass control of all forces in the area to the 1st Marines at 0800 and he did not wish to leave in the middle of an engagement. In the meantime, he offered to retain control of the operation until the recovery of

the Marine could be accomplished, but Brigadier General Glick, envisioning that the recovery could take a day or more, ordered that control of the operation pass at 0800, as scheduled. Twenty some years later, General Glick remembered:

I had instructions from the division to go ahead with the relief of the 26th Marines. They had been in Khe Sanh for months on end, and General Tompkins wanted them moved out. The other regiment was on the way; it was all set up to go at a certain time. There was a very questionable situation as to whether sending a patrol out was going to do anything anyway. So the decision was made to go ahead with the relief of the 26th Marines on schedule.^{19**}

In a repeat of the previous day's performance, an Army helicopter pilot agreed to attempt Hunnicutt's rescue. Corporal Hunnicutt tells the story:

About noon I guess, an Army Huey started flying around me, a spotter plane. The spotter plane dropped two red smokes on me and scared me to death. I thought they were going to blow me away. I tried to stand up and wave to them. I threw paper all over the place and waved, and one of the copters came right down on me about three times. I could see the man's face, and then finally he set down and one of the machine gunners came out and helped me into the plane.²⁰

Lieutenant Colonel Cahill met Hunnicutt at the Khe Sanh aid station. To Cahill's astonishment, Hunnicutt claimed that Captain Himmer had still been alive as late as the afternoon of the 17th. Although wounded himself, Hunnicutt had cared for the severely injured Himmer since the 16th, moving him down the ridge toward the battalion perimeter until they became separated when Hunnicutt fell into a gorge. Himmer was never seen alive again. For his courageous

*Colonel Meyers remembered the circumstances of the aborted rescue attempt somewhat differently. According to him, the helicopter landed and the fire team ran out and immediately came under fire. The helicopter also took about 20 hits in the engine and fuel compartments. At that point, the gunners on board the aircraft fired their .50-caliber machine guns to suppress the enemy fire and the "fire team reboarded and the 46 'backed out' from the touch down point and as they did, the tail ramp crushed the NVA soldier . . ." Meyers Comments. Colonel John E. Hansen, who commanded Provisional MAG 39 which controlled Marine helicopter support in Quang Tri Province, wrote that he and Major David L. Althoff, the executive officer of HMM-262, piloted the aircraft that landed with the fire team. Hansen could not see from the cockpit either the fighting or the soldier crushed by the tail ramp: "Our crew chief was in the rear of our helicopter and reporting to us on our radio internal communications system on the progress of the search . . ." Hansen recalled that as soon as the fire team returned they took off: "We were fortunate to be able to get back to Hill 689 with the aircraft still operating. The helicopter was later recovered by a heavy lift copter and returned to Quang Tri." Col John E. Hansen, Comments on draft, dtd 16Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).

**According to Colonel Meyers, he was very distressed at the situation. He remembered that General Tompkins denied his request for a delay in the change of operational control between the two Marine regiments. Meyers immediately briefed the incoming 1st Marines commander Colonel Stanley S. Hughes of the situation. Colonel Hughes stated that he would initiate the recovery operation at 0630 despite the fact that he was not to assume operational control until 0800. Meyers stated that as a "control feature" he permitted the patrol to go out 500 meters at which point "they would check in with whichever regimental commander had opcon at the time they reached this checkpoint." According to Meyers, the rescue took place before the patrol ever reached the 500 meter checkpoint, so the entire subject became moot. Meyers Comments. In an earlier statement, Meyers stated that before reaching the 500 meter checkpoint, the patrol saw Hunnicutt who warned them not to approach since he believed the NVA were using him as a decoy. The patrol called in gunships which provided cover while one of the aircraft rescued him. By this time, Colonel Meyers had been relieved of responsibility for the operation and was on his way to the Quang Tri base. Meyers Statement, Meyers Comments.

attempt to save his commanding officer's life, Corporal Hunnicutt was awarded the Navy Cross.²¹

In an operation conducted on 22 April, the 1st Marines recovered all but three of the bodies.* The final casualty count totalled 38 Marines and 3 Navy corpsmen killed in action and 32 Marines wounded, almost half of them seriously. But the story did not end there. General Tompkins appointed Colonel Walter H. Cuenin to investigate the operation and its aftermath. In reviewing the report of this investigation, General Tompkins noted "inexcusable" failures in reporting to division headquarters, as well as actions which "did not reflect the urgency of the occasion." He took administrative action to correct the problems, and relieved Lieutenant Colonel Cahill of command.^{22**}

This tragic and costly incident served as a sour note on which to end the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines' gallant part in the defense of the Khe Sanh Combat Base. The aftermath of the engagement, moreover, points up the extraordinary depth of responsibility faced by a military commander. Lieutenant Colonel Cahill, though thrice wounded while doing his utmost in a difficult and confused situation, nonetheless, bore the burden for the mistakes and failures laid at the doorstep of the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines.^{***}

*Bert Mullins, who served as a radioman with the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, commented: "This was a truly botched mess!" He remembered that Company B, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines "was scheduled to recover the bodies, but that was canceled when the air officer transmitted the plan in the clear to the 26th Marines." Since the 26th Marines departed the area on 18 April, this must have occurred probably on 17 April. After that period "Bravo went opcon to 1st Marines and three of their companies recovered the bodies." Bert Mullins, Comments on draft, dtd 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

**General Tompkins also stated that Colonel Meyers "failed to display the initiative and force the situation called for." Colonel Meyers in his rebuttal defended his conduct stating that he offered assistance to the battalion commander and was told it was not needed. He did not learn about the actual seriousness of the situation until the early hours of 17 April. When he arrived at the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines CP later in the morning and discovered there were 20 Marines still missing, he immediately made plans for a rescue operation. Meyers Statement, Meyers Comments.

***Lieutenant Colonel Cahill was later promoted to Colonel and continued to serve until his retirement in 1978. Colonel Frederic S. Knight, who also served as a battalion commander in 1968, wrote that "but for the grace of God, went I and every battalion commander in the 3d Marine Division." He recognized that Major General Tompkins' policy on recovering the bodies of Marine dead was part of the deep tradition of the Marine Corps of "taking care of each other, dead or alive . . ." Nevertheless, this policy of bringing back all the KIAs "had the effect of creating Tar Babies for the commanders; they wanted to disengage to reduce casualties and seek a more advantageous tactical situation, but under that stricture they could not." He would advocate a policy of weighing "our traditions . . . against the utilitarian principle of the greatest good for the greatest number and actions taken accordingly." Col Frederic S. Knight, Comments on draft, dtd 10Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).

Operation Scotland II

By this time, Operation Scotland II was in full swing. General Glick recalled that his new orders directed him now "to continue operations in . . . [the Khe Sanh] area, at least in a limited scope," rather than dismantle the base.²³ The units of the 1st Marines commanded by Colonel Stanley S. Hughes had begun to take the places of battalions of the 26th Marines. For example, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines left LZ Stud to the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines and shifted west to the hills near Khe Sanh: 558, 950, 861, and 881 South. The 2d Battalion, 1st Marines and the regimental command post set up in the combat base and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines remained along Route 9, providing security. The operation continued to grow as elements of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines arrived at Hill 689.²⁴

For the rest of April, the battalions patrolled the rugged country of the Huong Hoa District, occasionally making contact with the enemy, but for the most part finding only abandoned North Vietnamese bunkers and equipment and the remains of Communist soldiers left behind. Still, the NVA threatened to cut the road. On 19 April, a convoy of five trucks belonging to Battery B, 1st Battalion, 11th Marines ran into an enemy ambush halfway between Khe Sanh and Ca Lu. In the ensuing firefight, three Marines died and seven others suffered wounds. Only one truck continued on to Ca Lu, as the others were either damaged, pressed into service by the infantry to evacuate casualties, or left without drivers as a result of the casualties sustained in the ambush. Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. V. Hughes, the commander of the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, remembered that the ambush site "was up a draw leading into the river . . . The NVA dug bunkers into the root masses of trees lining the top of the draw . . . The firing ports . . . were almost impossible to see unless you observed a muzzle flash."²⁵ The 1st Marines Commander, Colonel Stanley Hughes, responded by restricting vehicle traffic on Route 9 "to only those vehicles performing tactical missions." To help control the road, he formed a "Provisional Mechanized Company" by combining elements of the 3d Tank Battalion: the Antitank Company (–); the 3d Platoon, Company B; and the 3d Platoon, Company G.²⁶

Near the end of April, Brigadier General Carl W. Hoffman relieved General Glick. For a short time the task force was known as "TF Hoffman," but soon became known as "TF H." In the habit of pronouncing all single letters by the phonetic equivalent used on the

radio, the Marines referred to the new command as "Task Force Hotel." General Hoffman continued to maintain his CP at Khe Sanh and directed the same type of limited mobile operations as General Glick. He also instituted what he called "key hole missions" consisting of four-man deep reconnaissance patrols. Using a "touch and go" insertion system, four or five helicopters with only one carrying the team would "come in at various locations, set down, and be gone almost immediately." The same procedures would be used to extract the teams. According to Hoffman these reconnaissance probes brought back invaluable intelligence about the location of enemy forces in the sector.²⁷

The units conducting Operation Scotland II continued to draw their supplies from the logistic support unit at Khe Sanh, as had the units in Operation Pegasus, in an effort to reduce the stocks which had accumulated there during the siege. On 5 May, Khe Sanh reported a five-day level of supplies and the logistic support unit closed down. TF Hotel transferred the remaining stocks to Ca Lu by convoy and helicopter. From that time on, units in northwestern Quang Tri Province drew their supplies from Ca Lu.²⁸

The requirement to resupply from LZ Stud once again increased the level of traffic along Route 9, prompting the NVA to respond with another ambush on 14 May. A convoy enroute to the combat base from Ca Lu encountered an enemy force along Route 9 just over one kilometer from the intersection where the coffee plantation road led north into Khe Sanh. Company G, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, which was providing security for the convoy, deployed and engaged the enemy.

Nearby, the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines was assembling for a helicopter lift to Hill 1015. When the ambush took place, the battalion canceled the move to Hill 1015 and went to the rescue of the convoy. The NVA fled in haste, but the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines caught up with them 1,500 meters south of the ambush site and attacked them from two sides. The North Vietnamese, in company strength, withdrew into a bunker complex, pursued by the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines. The ensuing fight lasted into the following day, leaving 74 enemy dead. The Marines lost 7 killed in action and 36 wounded.²⁹

The ambush of 14 May signalled the onset of increased enemy activity in the area. While patrolling

Marine M48 tanks patrol Route 9 between Ca Lu and Khe Sanh, passing a Marine small encampment along the way. The 3d Tank Battalion formed a "Provisional Mechanized Company" to monitor road traffic in this sector.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191580



Route 9, halfway between Khe Sanh and Lang Vei on 17 May, Company H, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines spotted five enemy soldiers and gave chase. The five led the company into an ambush where an NVA company lay in bunkers firing from close range and shouting, "Die Marine!" Company H withdrew slightly, called in artillery and air strikes, then assaulted and overran the bunkers. The Marines lost 6 dead and 8 wounded in the ambush, and counted 52 dead North Vietnamese.³⁰

From 17 to 19 May, two kilometers north of Company H's engagement on Route 9, elements of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines patrolled the ridge between Hill 552 and Hill 689. A dominant terrain feature overlooking the combat base, the ridge had been occupied or patrolled by U.S. forces regularly since the early part of Operation Pegasus. The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines encountered, nonetheless, several NVA units there, killing a total of 84 enemy and capturing 5 others in a three-day period.³¹

An even bigger fight was yet to come. During the night of 18–19 May, the enemy moved a battalion to within two kilometers of the combat base. At about 0400, an enemy platoon attacked Company H, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines southeast of Khe Sanh along Route 9. Assaulting from all sides with heavy small arms fire, grenades, satchel charges, and RPGs, the North Vietnamese killed three Marines and wounded three others before retiring. They left behind eight dead. Almost simultaneously, an enemy company, using 60mm mortar support, probed Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines on Hill 552. After a short fight, the Marines heard the North Vietnamese digging in. Exchanges of fire continued through the night. In the morning, the Marines assaulted the nearby enemy, driving them from their positions with 42 dead and 4 taken prisoner. Four Marines suffered wounds.³²

At 0710, 19 May, while Company I was still fighting near Hill 552, a platoon of Company F, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines and two tanks headed south from Khe Sanh along the coffee plantation road, sweeping ahead of a convoy bound for Ca Lu. About 300 meters from the road's intersection with Route 9, the Marines triggered an NVA ambush at a range of 25 meters. An enemy company, dug in, forced the Marines to take cover under a storm of automatic weapons fire, RPGs, and grenades. The Marines attempted an assault, but the enemy repulsed them, adding a heavy barrage of mortars to the Marines' discomfort. The rest of Company F, waiting at the combat base with the convoy, immediately reinforced the endangered platoon, then assaulted with the entire company. The Communists

not only threw back the Marines a second time, but even left their own positions to counterattack. This time, it was Company F's turn to hold fast, and the Marines repulsed the enemy assault. Lieutenant Colonel Billy R. Duncan, the battalion commander, recalled that by this time he had arrived at the scene with a small command group. The company commander, however, had been mortally wounded and "contact during the next hour was mixed with serious probes by both sides."³³

Company G advanced south along the road to join the fight, killing three North Vietnamese who had sneaked to the rear of Company F. After the two companies linked up, Lieutenant Colonel Duncan asked for napalm air strikes. According to Duncan, the enemy was anywhere between 35 to 50 yards distant from the Marine positions and too close for artillery support, therefore the call for napalm. While some of the Marines accidentally also were covered by napalm jelly, the fixed-wing strikes broke the enemy "will to stay and fight."³⁴ As the enemy retreated, Company E, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines struck the NVA from the flank. With the ambush site cleared, the rest of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines went to the field and searched the area south-southwest of the combat base trying to regain contact until 22 May, but met only minor resistance. During the operation, 8 Marines died, including the commanders of Companies F and G, and 34 fell wounded. The battalion captured 3 North Vietnamese and reported killing 113, of whom 69 were found in the ambush site.³⁵

The enemy troops killed and captured by the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines were described as "clean, well dressed, and neatly groomed."³⁶ According to Lieutenant Colonel Duncan, one of the prisoners stated the enemy mission was to "stop all movement along Route 9."³⁷ This did not match the depiction of the enemy forces in the Khe Sanh area as defeated and on the run. Coupled with the extraordinary surge in North Vietnamese offensive operations, such reports prompted the 1st Marines to warn of "a high probability of a division-size attack on the Khe Sanh Combat Base or one of the outlying units."³⁸ According to a rallier, Private (who claimed to be a former Warrant Officer) Vo Manh Hung, the NVA *308th Division* had arrived in northwestern Quang Tri Province with its *88th* and *102d Regiments*. The *308th Division* was one of the five so-called "Steel Divisions" of the North Vietnamese Army which could only be committed by the Joint Military Staff. Claiming that the *308th* had been committed because "the war is going to end," Hung told intelli-

gence officers that the *304th*, *308th*, *325th*, and another unidentified division would attack Khe Sanh. The North Vietnamese, he said, would cut Route 9, bring antiaircraft guns in from Laos and overrun the combat base "as Dien Bien Phu was." Intelligence officers placed little confidence in Hung's information, rating it "F-6" (the lowest rating for reliability and likelihood of being true). Still, III MAF sent Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. Lamontagne's 3d Battalion, 9th Marines to reinforce the 1st Marines for the defense of Khe Sanh against another possible major NVA effort.³⁹

For the rest of May, TF Hotel continued the original plan for Operation Scotland II, conducting offensive operations to maintain the initiative around Khe Sanh. Enemy contact was frequent and sometimes heavy, with the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines fighting a running battle which lasted for over a week.

On 24 May, Company G, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines engaged an NVA company on a hill overlooking Route 9 four kilometers southeast of the combat base, the same position to which enemy ambushers had retreated after attacking the convoy 10 days before. The enemy occupied bunkers which withstood a preparation of artillery fire and air strikes. Indeed, when the fires lifted, the enemy left their bunkers and attempted to envelop the Marines. Observing a larger enemy force to the rear of the closest North Vietnamese positions, Company G fell back and called for additional air, artillery, and mortar support. At 1800, the Marines attacked once more, still under extremely heavy fire. With helicopter gunships, artillery, and mortars supporting their advance, Company G swept up the hill, reaching the high ground at 2015 that night. The enemy broke contact, leaving behind the bodies of 58 dead. In the day's fighting, Company G suffered 15 dead and 21 wounded. The following morning, an air observer reported a "ragged enemy withdrawal to the south and southeast."⁴⁰

The 2d Battalion, 3d Marines remained near the site of the 24 May engagement. Three companies spaced about 700 meters apart stretched to the northwest in a line starting from Company F, on a small finger overlooking Route 9 about a kilometer west of the NVA bunker complex. Company E was at the intersection of Route 9 and the coffee plantation road, and Company G was on a finger between the other two companies.

At 0245, 28 May, Company F Marines, using a Starlight Scope, observed enemy movement outside their perimeter, and the acting company commander, First Lieutenant James L. Jones, called for an artillery mission. Three North Vietnamese with satchel charges

suddenly leapt into one of the company's listening posts north of the perimeter and blew themselves to bits, also killing three of the four Marines at the post. Immediately, an NVA battalion charged up the slope from the north on a wide front using a very heavy volume of small arms fire and more than 40 RPG rounds. With the enemy already in the perimeter, Lieutenant Jones gave the order to employ the final protective fires.*

Noticing that the North Vietnamese were using pencil flares, apparently as signals, Lieutenant Jones fired a red pencil flare of his own, at which the NVA precipitously broke contact.** The respite was brief, however. After a momentary lapse, the assault continued with renewed fury as the enemy battalion poured machine gun and rocket fire into Company F's lines. After several minutes of fierce fighting, the enemy drove the 1st Platoon from its holes and overran the company's 60mm mortar position. Under intense fire, the 2d and 3d Platoons restored the defensive perimeter while the 1st Platoon regrouped to establish a new position on a knoll to the east of the company perimeter.⁴¹

At 0330, after the enemy gained a foothold in the Marine perimeter, their attack slackened momentarily, but as if to demonstrate coordination, 40 rounds of 130mm artillery fire from enemy guns fell on Company G. A Douglas AC-47 "Spooky" gunship, accompanied by a flareship, reported on station at 0415 to light the battlefield and fire in support of the Marines. The NVA took the planes under heavy fire with .50-caliber machine guns and resumed their attack on Company F, this time from all sides.⁴²

For two hours, the battle raged, literally within Company F's original perimeter. Again and again, the NVA regrouped and stormed the Marines, attempting to overwhelm their defenses with massive ground assaults as RPG gunners on dominant high ground to the southeast smothered Company F under an estimated 500 rounds of rocket fire. With the flareship lighting the scene, "Spooky"

*The "FPF" is a defensive tactic used to stop imminent penetration of a unit's defensive lines. It employs supporting arms firing in pre-planned locations and the unit's own riflemen and machine gunners firing along predetermined lines at the maximum rate to create what is known as "interlocking bands of grazing fire." The significance of firing the FPF lies in the fact that it is an act of near desperation, a final resort which, if unsuccessful, will give way to hand-to-hand combat within the fighting holes of the defending unit.

** Hatold R. Blunk, who in 1968 was a PFC and a forward observer with Company F, commented that now-Lieutenant General James L. Jones told him in June 1996 that he fired the red flare rather than the green one because "'Green for go—Red for stop. It was that simple.'" Hatold R. Blunk, Comments on draft, dtd 27Jun96 (Vietnam Comment File).

slammed machine gun fire into the enemy at the rate of 18,000 rounds per minute and Battery B, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines joined the infantry battalion's own mortar platoon in pounding the North Vietnamese.⁴³

At 0700, air observers reported that "the entire battle area was littered with NVA dead."⁴⁴ The observers directed attack aircraft against enemy reinforcements moving in from the west. A napalm strike killed 30 North Vietnamese and ended the enemy effort but, unfortunately, also resulted in napalm impacting less than 20 meters from Company F. Fanned by the wind, the fire spread, soon forcing Company F from their positions after an all-out attack by an enemy battalion had failed. When the flames died down, the Marines quickly reclaimed their positions and fired on the withdrawing enemy.⁴⁵

Only 20 minutes later, at 1150, Company E arrived to help, first sweeping the ridge to the west of Company F. After securing this area, Company E turned on the North Vietnamese RPG gunners firing from the high ground near Company F's 1st Platoon. Within two hours of their attack, Company E put the enemy to flight. Following an emergency resupply and the evacuation of casualties from both companies, Company E moved out in pursuit. The battle cost the 2d Battalion 13 dead and 44 wounded. A search of the area revealed 230 dead North Vietnamese.⁴⁶

The shelling which fell upon Company G during the battle was a reminder that the enemy still maintained artillery positions within range of Khe Sanh. All through the siege, these guns had kept firing, despite many efforts to silence them. Even afterwards, the North Vietnamese continued to pound Marine positions. General Glick, the former Task Force commander, remembered that through the period he was there: "Khe Sanh was receiving heavy shelling on a daily basis . . ." and that "all commander, service, and living facilities [at Khe Sanh] were in underground bunkers or deep trenches."⁴⁷ On 30 May, TF Hotel provided security for a convoy of four 175mm self-propelled guns and four 8-inch self-propelled howitzers from Camp Carroll to Khe Sanh. These heavy artillery weapons took up firing positions from which they could reach the Co Roc cliffs, where the enemy guns were believed to be, and fired for 48 hours in a limited duration artillery raid dubbed Operation Drumfire II. Like the previous attempts at counterfire, which used

even B-52s against Co Roc, Operation Drumfire II had no noticeable effect.^{48*}

The enemy's infantry showed that they could match the annoying persistence of their gunners. At 0400, 31 May, the North Vietnamese attacked Company E, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines from all sides on the very ridge where the battle had taken place three days before. The enemy again coordinated their attack with 130mm artillery fire, as well as 82mm mortar fire. The ground attack, however, in no way matched the fury of the previous engagement and the NVA disengaged in the morning.⁴⁹

Only one kilometer to the north, Company B, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, moving toward Company E's engagement at 0850, ran into a North Vietnamese platoon entrenched just off Route 9. Company G, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines and Company E, 2d Battalion, 1st Marines fell in on the right of Company B. Attacking with all three companies abreast, supported by tanks, the Marines closed with the North Vietnamese and overran their trenches, finishing the fight hand-to-hand. They killed 42 North Vietnamese and lost 8 dead and 31 wounded. A single prisoner reported his unit to be the *102d Regiment* of the *308th Division*. Total Marine casualties for the morning's fighting were 32 dead and 99 wounded. A search revealed 136 enemy dead.⁵⁰

Operation Robin

As May ended, III MAF intelligence analysts confirmed reports that the North Vietnamese had infiltrated the *88th* and *102d Regiments* of their *308th Division* into northwestern Quang Tri Province. Further, aerial photography revealed a new enemy road under construction in the jungle south of Khe Sanh. The road entered South Vietnam from Laos and ran parallel to Route 9, but about 15 kilometers further south. When discovered, the road extended approximately 30 kilometers into South Vietnam along a path that seemed to

*Colonel Robert C. V. Hughes, the commander of the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, observed that "Operation Drumfire II like most preplanned, not observed, fire missions merely caused the NVA to pull back into their tunnels and wait it out. Our 'Rules of Engagement' forbid flying aerial observers over Co Roc who could have adjusted fire missions while the enemy was actively shelling the base." Col Robert C. V. Hughes, Comments on draft, n.d. [Jan95?] (Vietnam Comment File). Colonel William H. Dabney's explanation for the limited effect of Drumfire II on Co Roc was very simple: "That's not where the guns were!" Col William H. Dabney, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec 94] (Vietnam Comment File). For further information about the debate on the location of the enemy guns near Khe Sanh see the discussion in Chapter 14. See Chapter 26 for a further account of Drumfire II.

lead directly toward Hue City. A III MAF intelligence report on the road said, "agent reports have mentioned the possibility of enemy tank battalions in eastern Laos awaiting the completion of this road."⁵¹

TF Hotel planned a two-part operation in accordance with the 3d Marine Division's fresh emphasis upon mobility and firebases, under its new commander, Major General Raymond G. Davis, to counter the enemy buildup in the area.* The first phase, Operation Robin North, called for Colonel Hughes' 1st Marines to thrust south from the combat base into the mountains, engaging the newly introduced enemy forces near Route 9. In the second phase, Operation Robin South, Colonel Edward J. Miller's 4th Marines would conduct airmobile operations even further south to locate and destroy the enemy road.⁵²

Preparations for Operation Robin began at the end of May. Units garrisoning the hill positions around Khe Sanh shifted to make battalions available for the attack. Marine Aircraft Groups 36 and 39 delivered a five-day supply of ammunition to the units left around Khe Sanh so that helicopter assets could concentrate on supporting the extensive airmobile requirements of the operation. For the five days prior to D-Day, TF Hotel coordinated preparation fires which included 219 sorties of attack aircraft and 30 B-52 sorties delivering thousands of tons of bombs to blast landing zones in the jungle and to destroy enemy weapons and troop concentrations. Nine artillery batteries representing every caliber of artillery weapon in the Marine Corps fired over 10,000 rounds into the area of operations.⁵³

D-Day, 2 June, began with the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines occupying blocking positions along Route 9 immediately south of the combat base. At midday, Lieutenant Colonel Archie Van Winkle's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines conducted a helicopterborne assault into LZ Robin, a newly prepared landing zone situated in the steep hills 10 kilometers southeast of Khe Sanh. After landing, the battalion attacked north, hoping to drive the enemy into the blocking positions along Route 9. The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines flew from Ca Lu to LZ Robin and set up a defensive perimeter for the night.⁵⁴

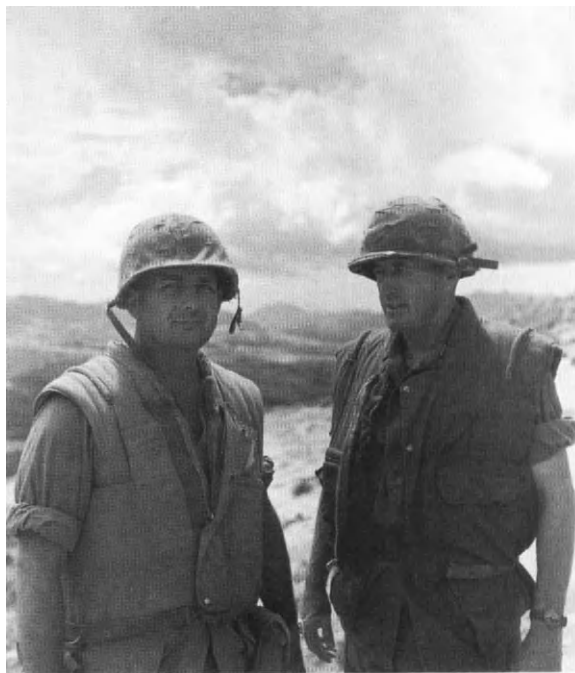
On 3 June, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines continued its attack to the north and TF Hotel fed the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines into the operation at LZ Robin. Relieved of the responsibility for defending LZ Robin, the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines boarded helicopters once



12th Mar ComdC, Jan69

Top, from the air, Landing Zone Robin, located in the steep hills, is about 10 kilometers southeast of Khe Sanh. Below, LtCol Archie Van Winkle, left, with the 3d MarDiv commander, MajGen Raymond G. Davis. LtCol Van Winkle's 1st Battalion, 1st Marines opened Operation Robin with the helicopter assault onto LZ Robin in line with Gen Davis' tactical emphasis upon mobility and fire support bases.

Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191666



*See both Chapters 15 and 18 for discussion of the tactical concepts introduced by General Davis.



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191807
Marines of Company A, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines barely can be seen as they climb up a hill through five-foot-high elephant grass near Landing Zone Robin.

again and assaulted LZ Loon, four kilometers to the west. The enemy, quiet on D-Day, greeted the Marines at LZ Loon with light small-arms, mortar, and artillery fire, delaying the helicopter lift but not seriously hampering the landings.⁵⁵

North Vietnamese interest in LZ Loon became apparent the following morning, only hours after the Marines arrived. At 0600, a company of the NVA 88th Regiment probed Company F, 2d Battalion, 4th Marines. After a short engagement, the enemy withdrew at dawn, leaving 34 dead. Company F lost 2 killed and 24 wounded.⁵⁶

With both of the new landing zones secured by the 1st Marines, TF Hotel began preparing them to serve as firebases to support the 4th Marines during the second phase of the operation. The headquarters of the 4th Marines and the 1st Battalion, 12th Marines landed at LZ Robin and prepared to assume control as engineers used equipment lifted in by helicopters to construct artillery emplacements, bunkers, trenches, and barbed

wire entanglements.⁵⁷

Companies C and D, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines flew into LZ Loon, freeing the 2d Battalion to join the attack north toward the blocking positions. In keeping with the airborne character of the operation, the 2d Battalion advanced by conducting still another helicopterborne assault into LZ Crow, two kilometers northeast of LZ Loon and near the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.⁵⁸

The attack northward met its first significant resistance on 5 June, when Company C, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines engaged an enemy unit four kilometers south of Route 9. The enemy troops fought from bunkers and from trees. Company C attacked the position, supported by artillery and the battalion's 106mm recoilless rifles. In a fight which lasted into the following afternoon, the Marines overran and destroyed a North Vietnamese bunker complex which documents identified as belonging to the 304th Division, a veteran of the earlier fighting during the siege of Khe Sanh.⁵⁹

During the evening of 5 June, the 4th Marines assumed control of its own 1st Battalion, disposed between LZ Loon and LZ Robin, in preparation for the beginning of Operation Robin South the next morning. Before the Marines could strike, however, the North Vietnamese hit first. At 0600, an enemy battalion assaulted LZ Loon, supported by artillery and mortar fire.⁶⁰ Companies C and D fought back, calling for their own artillery and mortars, as well as attack aircraft and helicopter gunships. After a two-hour battle, the enemy withdrew slightly, leaving 154 dead, but kept up a galling fire with their small arms, and frequent shelling from nearby 82mm mortars and the ever-present 130mm guns. By midday, the continued shelling had rendered LZ Loon untenable.⁶¹ Helicopters lifted Company C back to LZ Robin at 1400, followed a few hours later by Company D. The last helicopter out, a CH-46, took heavy fire from a North Vietnamese .50-caliber machine gun and crashed in flames, bringing the total U.S. casualty count for the defense of the LZ to 24 dead and 37 wounded.⁶²

Despite the attack on LZ Loon, on 6 June, as scheduled, the 4th Marines launched Operation Robin South. Helicopters lifted the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines into a landing zone southeast of LZ Robin, near the eastern extension of the North Vietnamese jungle road. The battalion located the road and found it to be quite well-developed, up to 18 feet wide in places, with stone bridges, culverts, and a surface graded smooth by heavy engineering equipment. The North Vietnamese had concealed the road by bending trees over it and

tying them together to form a living archway of vegetation beneath which troops and vehicles could pass unseen from the air. Along the road, the Marines found fighting holes, living bunkers, hospitals, kitchens, and a wealth of equipment, especially tools. There were picks, shovels, wrecking bars, axes, and explosives. Captain Gary E. Todd, who commanded Company I, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines and a former division intelligence officer, observed that the road "was a virtual clone of the Ho Chi Minh Trail." According to Todd, it was "more than a road, it qualified as a type of logistics infrastructure."⁶³ Prisoners and captured documents showed that the construction of the road was the mission of the NVA 83d *Engineer Battalion*. One prisoner said that the construction schedule called for the road to reach Hue by 30 July, a formidable task which would have required pushing the road through the steep jungle terrain at a rate of over one mile—as the crow flies—per day.⁶⁴

For several days, the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines advanced along the road to the west, blasting apart bridges and culverts (sometimes with captured North Vietnamese explosives), cratering the road surface, and destroying the enemy facilities found along the way. Company A, 3d Engineer Battalion provided much of the technical expertise for the demolition project. The North Vietnamese avoided contact.⁶⁵

As battalions returned to Khe Sanh from participating in Operation Robin North, they freed other units to join the 4th Marines in Operation Robin South. On 11 June, helicopters landed the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines near Lang Hole, a Montagnard village south of LZ Loon said by prisoners to be the site of a major enemy supply cache. The battalion searched the area for almost a week with only light contact.⁶⁶

The 2d Battalion, 4th Marines joined its parent regiment in Operation Robin South on the morning of 14 June by conducting a helicopterborne assault onto the NVA road near the border with Laos. They advanced east along the road, toward the 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, which was still moving down the road from the other end. The 2d Battalion found the western portion of the road as well developed as the rest. In one area they found a complex of over 500 bunkers and storage areas containing 400 pounds of ammonium nitrate (a crude explosive), hand tools, a welding machine, a one-and-one-half-ton truck and a complete machine shop mounted on a Russian three-ton truck. Unwilling to leave the latter prize behind, ingenious young Marine tinkers dismantled the

entire truck and machine shop, then transferred the pieces to Khe Sanh by helicopter where they reassembled it for the drive along Route 9 to the 3d Marine Division headquarters at Dong Ha.⁶⁷

One hour before dawn on 15 June, a battalion or more of the North Vietnamese 88th *Regiment* struck the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines south of Lang Hole. Pressing their attack behind heavy RPG fire, the enemy infantry penetrated Company M's lines and occupied several fighting holes, setting up a machine gun in what had been the company command post. As the battle entered its third hour, the Marines counterattacked, ejecting the North Vietnamese from the perimeter. Helicopter gunships harried the enemy attack formations, helping to reduce their enthusiasm to continue the assault. Just before 0900, the North Vietnamese fired a "green star cluster"* and the attack ended. The Marines swept the area, occasionally engaging North Vietnamese troops who feigned death, then "popped up" to fire their weapons. The final tally was 219 enemy killed along with 11 prisoners, 82 weapons, and 20 radios captured. The Marines lost 16 killed and 58 wounded.⁶⁸

Despite the seemingly staggering casualties the North Vietnamese suffered on 15 June, the battle near Lang Hole appeared only to whet their appetites for fighting. The very next morning at 0215, they struck LZ Torch, a new fire support base near the jungle road which was defended by the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines since its withdrawal from LZ Loon. An enemy company fell upon the perimeter from the south and west, using mortar fire, RPGs, machine guns, and satchel charges to pave the way. Concentrating their assault on a small part of the perimeter, the enemy penetrated Company I's lines and advanced on the guns of Battery C, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines. Under the light of flares, the Marine gunners leveled the tubes of their howitzers and slammed round after round of "Beehive" ammunition** into the attacking North Vietnamese. Although the enemy reached one of Battery C's gun emplacements, the "Beehive" proved too much for them. Leaving 28 dead, they fell back at 0400. Fourteen Marines died in the assault.⁶⁹

The North Vietnamese continued their program

* A pyrotechnic signaling device.

** An artillery antipersonnel round which explodes sending thousands of tiny darts, called flechettes, toward the enemy.

of predawn attacks on 18 June, when NVA sappers crawled to within 30 feet of Company K, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines near the jungle road. Preceding their assault with a mortar preparation, the enemy sprang from their nearby positions against Company K, quickly penetrating the lines. The Marines held their ground and fought back, using artillery and air support to help repulse the attacking North Vietnamese battalion. After four hours of fighting, the Marines drove back the Communist troops. Three Douglas A-4E Skyhawks of Marine Attack Squadron 311 pounded the retreating enemy, killing many. Sporadic fighting continued through the day; the Marines engaged enemy snipers and automatic weapons emplacements left behind to cover the withdrawal. When the last resistance ended, 131 North Vietnamese lay dead in and around Company K's position. Marine casualties numbered 11 killed and 30 wounded.⁷⁰

On the day after Company K's battle along the jungle road, Operation Robin South ended and the 4th Marines returned to Khe Sanh having accomplished its mission. The Marines cratered the road in 28 places, destroyed 2 bridges and 4 culverts, and created a rock slide in one place. In addition, they reported killing 635 enemy and captured 48 NVA, an extraordinary prisoner count. Large quantities of enemy facilities were destroyed and supplies captured in the area of operations, dealing the North Vietnamese a hard blow.⁷¹

Operations Robin North and Robin South were the first multi-regiment Marine Corps operations "supported entirely by helicopter."⁷² Marine commanders were highly enthusiastic, touting the "mobile offensive concept."⁷³ One unit's official account recorded that the operations:

... confirmed that fire base techniques are well within the operational scope of the Marine Corps, both conceptually and doctrinally. . . . Experience will improve our ability to manage the fire base concept. "Robin South" gave us a running start.⁷⁴

Razing Khe Sanh: Operation Charlie

General Westmoreland departed Vietnam on 11 June, in the middle of Operation Robin South, and was relieved by General Creighton Abrams, his former deputy, as Commander USMACV. Just over a week later, on 19 June, TF Hotel began executing the 3d Marine Division plan for the evacuation

and destruction of Khe Sanh Combat Base: Operation Charlie.⁷⁵

The units returning from Operation Robin South assumed new positions to screen and support the evacuation. Along Route 9, battalions of the 4th Marines occupied key terrain from which they could control the road and protect the many convoys between Khe Sanh and Ca Lu required to move the supplies and equipment out of the combat base. The 1st Marines defended Khe Sanh and the surrounding hill positions. The 3d Battalion, 9th Marines reported to the 1st Marines at the combat base to serve as a work force to assist Company A, 1st Engineer Battalion in the physical dismantling and destruction of the facilities at Khe Sanh.⁷⁶

The plan for Operation Charlie called for the Marines to withdraw all salvageable supplies and equipment and to destroy all fortifications and anything of possible use which they could not move. They went about the task thoroughly. Convoys rolled from Khe Sanh to Ca Lu daily, heavily laden with stockpiled supplies, salvaged fortification materials, and previously stranded damaged equipment. Detachments from the 3d and 11th Engineer Battalions and the 3d Shore Party Battalion arrived with bulldozers and mechanics to help with the work. Even burned out vehicle hulks and damaged equipment were cut apart into smaller pieces, moved to secure areas, and buried to prevent their use in enemy propaganda. The same Navy Seabee unit which had toiled to repair and upgrade the airstrip months before now returned to

General Rosson observed that he was involved "directly and personally" with the decision to deactivate Khe Sanh." He remembered that after the "decision [to deactivate] had been made early in June. I discussed with General Davis the methodology and timing of the deactivation." Gen William B. Rosson, Comments on draft, dtd 27Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File). General Hoffman remarked that he received a decision from higher headquarters sometime in June "that we would abandon Khe Sanh combat base in favor of moving to a new combat base" initially called Stud. While Hoffman believed his units "were successfully conducting reconnaissance-in-force operations in any direction we wanted to," he recognized the desirability of consolidating mobile operations and shortening supply lines. MajGen Carl W. Hoffman, Comments on draft, dtd 15Dec94 and MajGen Carl W. Hoffman intvw, 14Nov68, pp. 151-53 (Oral HistColl, MCHC), hereafter Hoffman Comments and intvw. According to Army historian George L. MacGarrigle: "Westy never wanted to abandon Khe Sanh; Abrams certainly did. When Westy returned to Washington for his confirmation hearing [for his appointment as Army Chief of Staff], Abe was the "acting ComUSMACV." The agreement was, the base would not be abandoned on Westmoreland's 'watch' and I'm almost certain that MACV provided Westy with his 'cover' statement." George L. MacGarrigle, Comments on draft, dtd 5Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Both photos are from the Abel Collection

Top, Marines of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines at Khe Sanh salute their fallen comrades during a memorial service for those who gave their lives to defend the base. Below, a Marine from the battalion takes a long look at the Khe Sanh airstrip before preparing to depart



rip up the steel matting runway. Working parties destroyed over 800 bunkers and 3 miles of concertina wire, throwing the wire into the trenches and filling them with soil. They slit open the countless sandbags and emptied them, wrecked standing structures, and burned what remained to the ground. As a final step to discourage the North Vietnamese from attempting to dig through the ruins for useful material, the Marines sprinkled the area with CS powder, an irritant chemical agent.^{77*}

The enemy could not, and did not, misinterpret the activity at the combat base. Communist political officers proclaimed the U.S. withdrawal from Khe Sanh as a victory for the North Vietnamese Army. III MAF warned units at Khe Sanh that, as the withdrawal proceeded, the enemy might conduct limited offensive operations to lend credibility to their claims.^{78**}

The prophecy came true on 1 July. Three kilometers southeast of the combat base near the old French fort, the NVA began a series of light probes against Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines at 0325. The probes, accompanied by mortar fire, continued for four hours. At 0725, a NVA unit of at least company-size launched a full-scale assault on the Marine perimeter to the accompaniment of mortar fire and 130mm guns. Alerted by the probes, Company I quickly blunted the enemy attack and the North Vietnamese broke contact. Later that morning, the Marines sighted the enemy unit nearby and engaged it once more, calling in helicopter gunships and attack aircraft. The fighting con-

tinued until late afternoon, with the Marines reporting over 200 dead North Vietnamese, half of them within 100 meters of Company I's lines. Two Marines died in the engagement.⁷⁹

For the next several days, the enemy continued to step up the pressure. Occasional heavy incoming artillery and mortar fire fell on the hill positions, and small groups of North Vietnamese probed Marine perimeters attempting to cut through barbed wire barriers. There were no further attacks, however, on the scale of that of 1 July.⁸⁰

At 2000 on 5 July, the Khe Sanh Combat Base, now just a smoldering scar on the land, officially closed.⁸¹ On the following day, the 1st Marines sent their remaining rolling stock to Ca Lu by convoy. As the last trucks passed over Route 9, engineers removed and recovered the tactical bridging equipment which they had installed during Operation Pegasus. Just before midnight on 6 July, Operation Charlie ended.⁸²

The 1st Marines remained near Khe Sanh for another week, attempting to recover the remains of the Marines who died in the fighting near Hill 689. After days of seesaw battles which left 11 Marines and 89 North Vietnamese dead, the 1st Battalion finally recovered 7 bodies under cover of darkness on 11 July using small teams operating by stealth. With this accomplished, the 1st Marines boarded helicopters and flew east to Quang Tri City.⁸³

Twenty years after the battle, when asked to name the decision of which he was the most proud, General Westmoreland replied, "The decision to hold Khe Sanh."⁸⁴ It had been a controversial move in 1968, but after the commitment in men and materiel to hold it, the decision to evacuate the place was even more difficult for many to understand. In fact, there were more American casualties at Khe Sanh and its immediate vicinity after the breakout until the final evacuation of the base than during the siege.^{***} As a battle which

* Colonel Billy R. Duncan, the commander of the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines, wrote that at the time his unit departed Khe Sanh, "much of the steel matting was still in place. Too difficult to remove . . ." and the enemy guns were "still a daily threat." Col Billy R. Duncan, Comments on draft, dtd 15Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). Major Gary E. Todd, the commander of Company I, 3d Battalion, 9th Marines, observed that the dismantling required "working parties to move around exposed and 'non-tactical' in what was still very much a *tactical* situation. The more bunkers we destroyed and trenches we filled, the less protection we had against incoming artillery, a fact not wasted on an ever-watchful enemy." Maj Gary E. Todd, Comments on draft, dtd 28Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File).

** General Hoffman stated he had instituted an orderly program of withdrawing his units so as not to reveal his intentions to the North Vietnamese. He blamed Correspondent John S. Carroll from the *Baltimore Sun* for breaking news confidentiality and printing a story that the Marines were abandoning Khe Sanh. According to Hoffman, the North Vietnamese increased their bombardment after the publication of the story. MACV suspended Carroll's press credentials for six months. Hoffman intvw and Comments. For the suspension of Carroll's accreditation, see also John Prados and Ray W. Stubbe, *Valley of Decision, The Siege of Khe Sanh* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991), p. 448.

*** The confusion about the number of Marine casualties in the Khe Sanh battle is one aspect of the controversy over the defense of the base. According to general Marine Corps records, the Marines sustained casualties of 205 dead from November 1967 through the end of March, the period of Operation Scotland. The casualty reporting system was based on named operations rather than on actual locale. Another 92 Marines were killed in Operation Pegasus during April, and another 308 during Operation Scotland II through 30 June. Scotland II continued through the end of the year with another 72 Marines added to the KIA list. Obviously all of the operations included a broader area than the perimeter of the Khe Sanh base itself, thus compounding the difficulty in determining an exact number of casualties. To do so, the researcher must "clarify the time span and geographical area of the so-called 'Battle of Khe Sanh.'" Jack Shulimson, Sr. Vietnam Historian, ltr to Bert Mullins, dtd 2Sep1983 (Vietnam War, Khe Sanh

captured the personal interest of many Americans, to include President Johnson, Khe Sanh became a symbol. When U.S. forces withdrew from the hills of Khe Sanh, the inevitable question arose: "Why did we defend it in the first place?" At that point in time, in January 1968, there was probably no choice unless the

U.S. was prepared to air evacuate its troops and abandon its supplies there. Whether the base should have been closed immediately after Pegasus or whether a base should have been established there at all are still subjects of debate as is the motivation of the North Vietnamese in laying siege to the base.

File, RefSec, MCHC). Former Navy Chaplain Lieutenant Commander Ray W. Stubbe, who has done extensive research in this area, has provided the following figures based on his findings: He found the number of Marines killed for Operation Scotland to be 274 as opposed to 205. He cautions, however, that there are differences between the figures given in the command chronologies and those in the after-action reports and that none of the totals really jibe. Lieutenant Commander Stubbe gives as the best total for Operation Scotland and Pegasus, not including Lang Vei, as 560, including specialized Marine, Army, and Air Force units. He gives a total of 219 KIA (Army and South Viet-

namese) for Lang Vei. Chaplain Stubbe explained that there were many reasons for the discrepancies including staff officers frequently engaged with an on-going operation, "while still attempting to write reports on a previous operation." He also observed that for most troops, "the entire period from the beginning of the siege until their departure is, for them, their 'Khe Sanh battle.' Dates of the beginnings and endings of the various operations are as artificial and abstract as the border of Laos and Vietnam! It is the difference between 'lived' battles and 'officially recorded' battles." LCdr Ray W. Stubbe, USN, Comments on draft, dtd 23Oct and 25Oct94 (Vietnam Comment File).

CHAPTER 17

Mini-Tet and Its Aftermath in Southern I Corps

Going into the Go Noi—Mini-Tet and Operation Mameluke Thrust, May 1968
Operation Allen Brook Continues—Mameluke Thrust Also Continues

Going into the Go Noi

By the beginning of May 1968, both the Marines at Da Nang and the Communist forces in Quang Nam were in the midst of preparations to launch offensive operations against one another. While during April the enemy in Quang Nam had largely confined its activities to guerrilla activities, the increased number of reconnaissance Stingray sightings indicated that Communist regulars were reinfiltrating their old positions. The Marine command was especially concerned about the Go Noi Island sector, about 25 kilometers south of Da Nang, outlined by the confluence of the Ky Lam, Thu Bon, Ba Ren, and Chiem Son Rivers.

In the Go Noi, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines in April had conducted Operation Jasper Square* in the western sector with relatively limited contact. Nevertheless, the Communists had controlled the area for years. With the continued existence of both a Communist political and military command infrastructure there, the local populace maintained a strong Viet Cong orientation, making the island a relatively "safe haven" for both NVA and VC military units. III MAF knew Go Noi was home to three local Viet Cong units, the *R-20 Battalion*, *V-25 Battalion*, and *T-3 Sapper Battalion*, as well as *Group 44*, the headquarters for the enemy's operations in Quang Nam Province. It also suspected that elements of the *2d NVA Division* were trying to reenter the sector.¹

In early May, Major General Donn J. Robertson, the 1st Marine Division commander, ordered the 7th Marines into the Go Noi to forestall the NVA from staging a new offensive. On 4 May at 0500, Lieutenant Colonel Charles E. Mueller's 2d Battalion, 7th Marines launched a two-company "No Name Operation" into the Go Noi. Crossing Liberty Bridge at 0500, Companies E and G, supported by a platoon of tanks, attacked eastward towards the main north-south railroad tracks. On the first day of the operation, the Marines evacuated some 220 civilians, mostly old men, women, and children, out of the Go Noi to the district capital of Dai Loc.²

In the first phase of the operation, which soon became Operation Allen Brook,* the battalion encountered light although persistent resistance from enemy local force and guerrilla units. For the next few days, the 2d Battalion attacked to the east towards the main north-south railroad tracks experiencing increasing but still relatively scattered opposition to their advance. Although the terrain was flat with relatively clear fields of fire, the local units were familiar with the locale and took full advantage of the advantages offered by the fortified hamlets that dotted the Go Noi. Surrounded and interlaced by dense hedges, these hamlets were connected one to another by a series of trenches and tunnels which provided "excellent cover and concealment" for their defenders.³

While Company A, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines relieved Company G on 7 May, Colonel Reverdy M. Hall, the 7th Marines' commander, also reinforced the 2d Battalion on the same day with Company K from the 3d Battalion. Through 8 May, the Marine companies accounted for some 88 enemy troops at a cost of 9 Marines killed and 57 wounded. On the 9th, about 1820, the sweep forces just west of the railroad tracks came under heavy small arms and machine gun fire as well as a mortar salvo outside of the hamlet of Xuan Dai (2). Taking casualties of 1 dead and 11 wounded, the infantry pulled back and called for artillery support and airstrikes. After the last air mission, the Marine companies clambered over the tracks which fronted the hamlet on the west and pushed into Xuan Dai (2). Thirty minutes after the initial action, the Marines secured the hamlet. As a result of this action, the Marine battalion reported 80 enemy killed. A Stingray patrol about 1900 observed some 200 enemy troops moving to the southwest of Xuan Dai and called in

* See Chapter 13.

** Lieutenant Colonel Mueller recalled that the operation "very quickly became operation Allen Brook" in that his two other companies "and a myriad of support was attached to my battalion." A "No Name" operation usually involved two companies with minimum support. The concept was to "reinforce quickly when significant contact was made." LtCol Charles E. Mueller, Comments on draft, n.d. [Jan95] (Vietnam Comment File).



Photo is from Abel Collection

Liberty Bridge over the Ky Lam River and a collapsed bridge beside it are visible from the air. The bridge connected An Hoa and Go Noi Island to Da Nang

both artillery and another air strike which resulted in a secondary explosion.⁴

For the next four days, the Marines again met only sporadic resistance and encountered no regular NVA units. In fact, up through the 13th, the indications were that the enemy troops that the Marines had engaged to that point except for the fight for Xuan Dai were from the usual VC units known to be in the Go Noi. Even the enemy force in Xuan Dai did not appear to be an NVA tactical unit. According to recovered documents and to a prisoner captured in that fight, the enemy in Xuan Dai were from the 155th Battalion, 2d NVA Regiment. Marine intelligence officers believed the 155th to be a temporary infiltration group rather than a regular NVA battalion.⁵

Hoping to find the suspected NVA regular units from the 2d NVA Division believed to have returned to the Go Noi, the Marine command decided to reorient Allen Brook from east to west. On 13 May, General Robertson reinforced the 2d Battalion with Company I, 3d Battalion, 27th Marines. While the other three companies attached to the 2d Battalion reversed their direction, Marine helicopters lifted Company I, 27th

Marines into a landing zone in the Que Son Mountains to the south overlooking Go Noi Island. The following day Company I moved down to blocking positions near the Ba Ren River where it was joined by the other Marine companies now advancing to the west. On the 15th, at 1400, the 2d Battalion with all four Marine companies with the attached tanks arrived back at Liberty Bridge. In their reverse march, the Marines had encountered the same "harassing small arms and mortar fires and fluid guerrilla tactics" that had characterized the operation for the most part up to that time.⁶

Operation Allen Brook appeared to be at an end. At least that was what the Marines wanted the enemy to believe. At 1800, on the 15th, Marine helicopters helilifted Company E and the command group of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines out of the operational area. The commander of the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, Lieutenant Colonel Roger H. Barnard, then assumed command of the remaining forces in Allen Brook. To continue the "tactical deception," Lieutenant Colonel Barnard ordered the units still in Allen Brook to cross Liberty Bridge as if the Marines were closing out the operation. Then shortly after midnight on the 16th,



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A374442

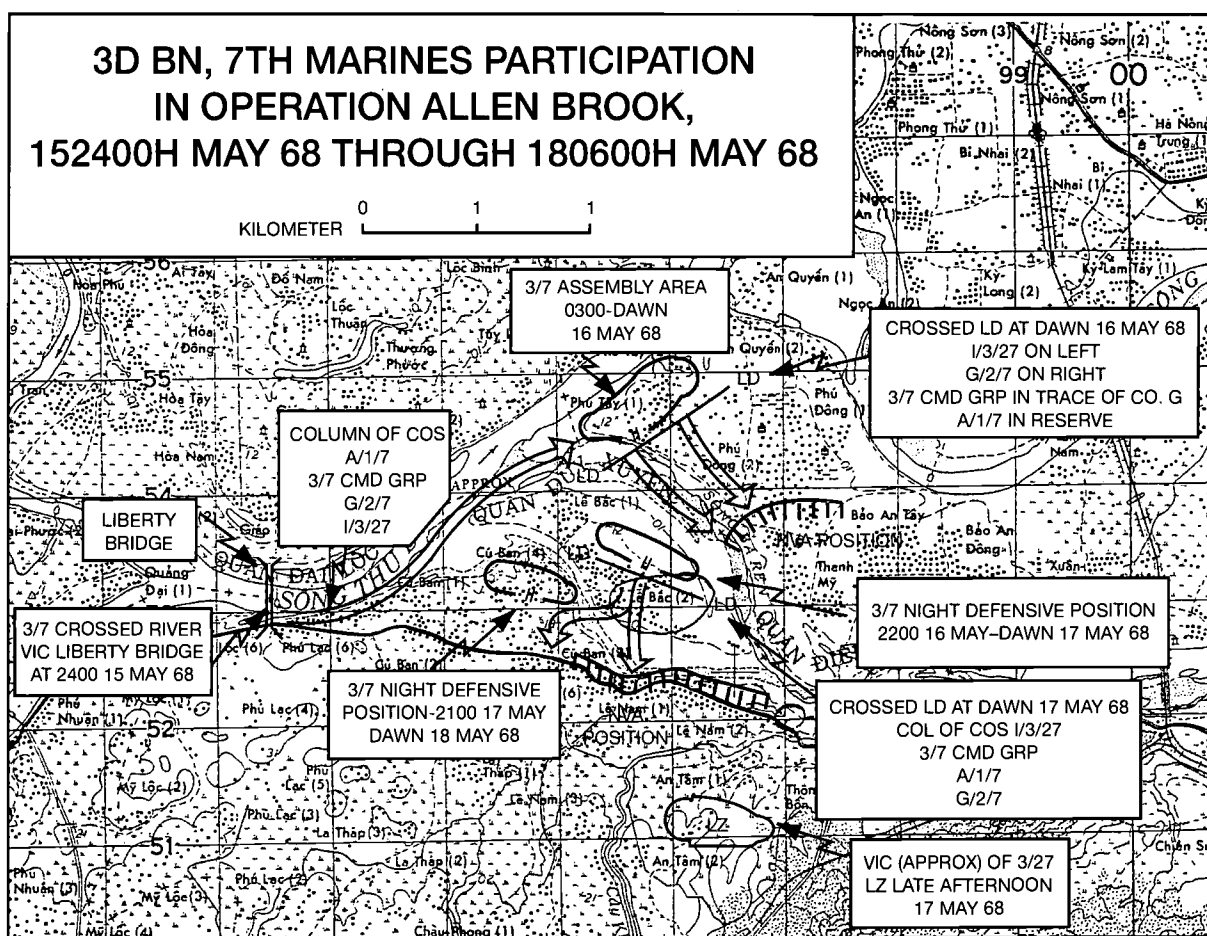
A Marine from the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines during Operation Allen Brook cautiously approaches a damaged hut. The VC dominated the hamlets in the Go Noi.

the command group of the 3d Battalion together with Companies A of the 1st Battalion and G of the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, together with Company I, 3d Battalion, 27th Marines, recrossed the Thu Bon River and "moved in a single file under cover of darkness for security." Ironically, the 3d Battalion had none of its own organic companies in the operation as it reached its line of departure about 2,500 meters northeast of Liberty Bridge, just north of the objective area, a few hours prior to dawn. According to Barnard, Colonel Hall, who had monitored the radio traffic, "was beside himself with the success" of the plan to reenter the Go Noi.*

Lieutenant Colonel Barnard remembered that his objective "was a suspected NVA installation We had reason to believe they did not know we were there

. . . ." According to the battalion commander he was to attack to the south with the mission "to search for, fix, and destroy the enemy." As the Marines advanced with two companies on line and one in reserve, they were "hoping to execute a major surprise." In fact, both sides were to surprise one another. About 0900 on the morning of the 16th, the 3d Battalion encountered an NVA battalion in the hamlet of Phu Dong (2) about 4,000 meters west of Xuan Dai, the scene of the latest heaviest fighting. According to Barnard, "we hit a hornet's nest." Two of his companies came under deadly machine gun fire and the battalion commander described the situation "like being in the butts at the rifle range." The Marine battalion tried to flank the enemy position, but as Barnard recalled, "we needed more resources than we had for the situation." He recalled that even maximum supporting artillery and mortar fire failed to break the NVA defenses. Finally, extensive close air support, including over 50 air strikes, "carried the day." By early evening, the Marine infantry which had fought continuously throughout the day in the oppressive heat finally forced the NVA out of their trenches and bunkers. Afraid of encirclement, the

*Colonel Barnard credited the 7th Marines commander, Colonel Hall, with the idea of openly pulling out the 2d Battalion, and unobtrusively bringing in the 3d Battalion under cover of darkness. According to Barnard, Hall "was convinced that after a week of 2/7 stirring up the AO [Area of Operations], we could fool the enemy into believing the Marines had had enough." Col Roger H. Barnard, Comments on draft, dtd 13Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).



Map Courtesy of Col Roger H. Barnard, USMC (Ret)

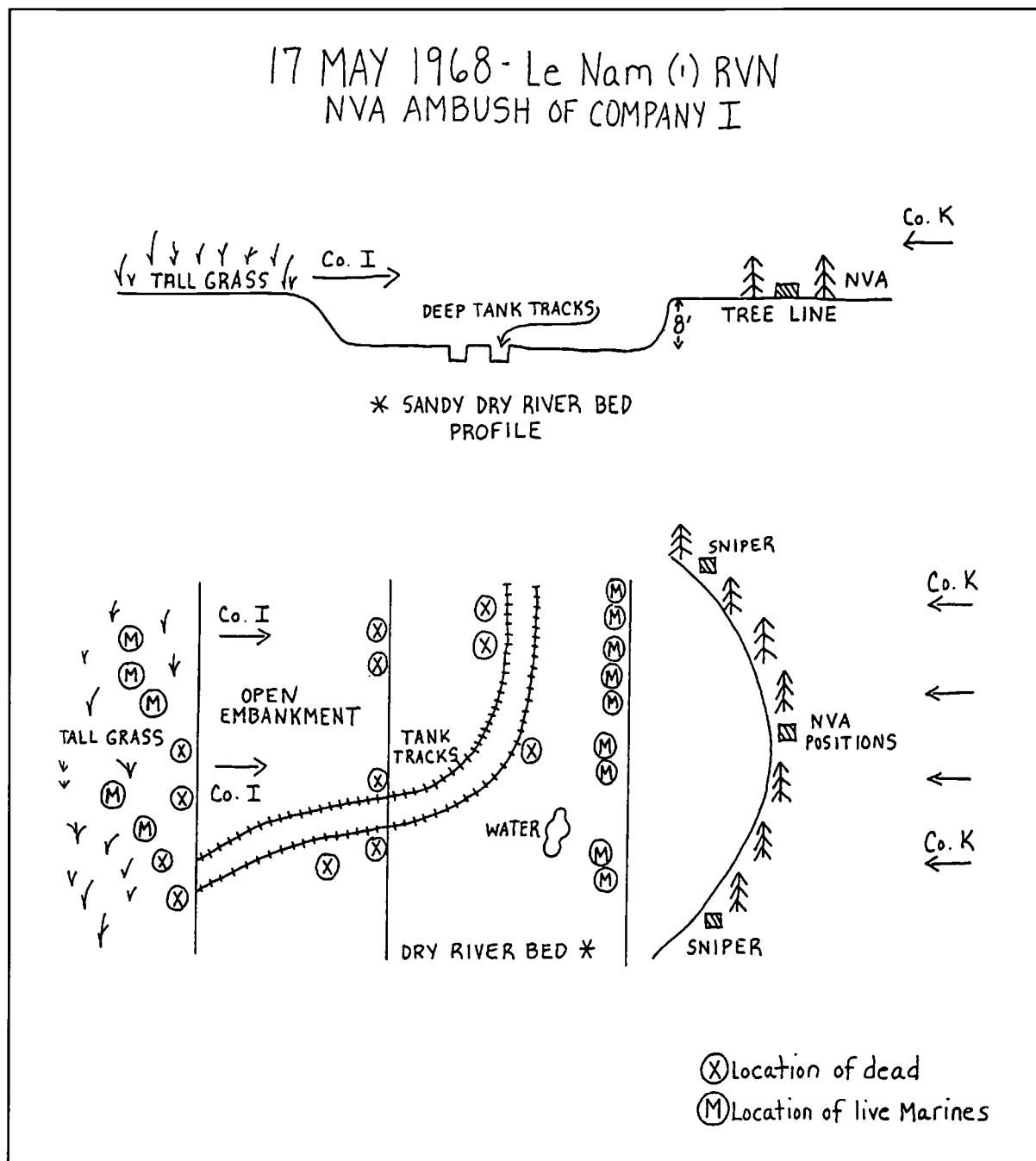
enemy withdrew leaving more than 130 dead in the hamlet. Marine losses were also heavy: 25 dead and 38 wounded. One Marine, Second Lieutenant Paul F. Cobb, a platoon leader with Company A, and one Navy hospital corpsman, Robert M. Casey with Company G, were both awarded the Navy Cross posthumously for their actions in the fight for Phu Dong (2).⁸

Despite the Marine losses, Colonel Hall, the 7th Marines commander, believed that his plan had been a success. Barnard's unit had uncovered the North Vietnamese units in the Go Noi and hit them before they were able to mass their forces. Lieutenant Colonel Barnard later wrote, "when all enemy resistance ceased and the dust had settled it was clear we had . . . achieved a significant victory." The suspected NVA installation was an "NVA regimental headquarters, with attendant security and a major staging area for supplies . . ." The battalion commander remembered that the enemy supplies were so extensive, that they could not evacuate them to the rear. Marine helicopters, however, took out the casualties and the bat-

talion "received water and ammo resupply." Colonel Hall directed Barnard to continue his southward advance the next morning.⁹

After an uneventful night, in which the battalion had moved twice, it started out at dawn from a line of departure, just north of the hamlet of Le Bac (2). Advancing southward, the battalion was again in a column of companies, with Company I, 27th Marines in the lead, and Companies A and G of the 7th Marines, and the battalion command group, following in trace. Lieutenant Colonel Barnard remembered, "We were in open country, without a defined objective." If Company I made contact, Barnard planned to use Company A as a maneuver unit and Company G in reserve.¹⁰

As events turned out, the Marine battalion ran into even stronger resistance than the previous day. That morning, as Company I came upon a dry river bed with a densely wooded treeline on the northern bank bordering the hamlet of Le Nam (1), just above Route 537, the North Vietnamese sprung an ambush from elaborate defenses "of significant width." Strong enemy



Courtesy of Col Tullis J. Woodham, Jr., USMC (Ret)

resistance and the terrain combined to prevent Lieutenant Colonel Barnard's initial efforts to come to the assistance of his embattled company. Upon hearing of the contact and the extent of the enemy defenses, he immediately ordered Company A to attempt to flank the enemy from the west. While the ground was flat, it was covered with tall grass which impeded the flank-

ing movement. In the meantime, as the reports from Company I "were not good," Barnard ordered Company G to join the embattled unit. Enemy resistance, however, proved too strong and prevented Company G from advancing. A frustrated battalion commander called for artillery and air support. He remembered that as his command group with Company A strug-

gled through the tall grass, he had his artillery and air officers "calling mission after mission . . ." The situation for Company I was already desperate when Colonel Hall, the 7th Marines commander, radioed Barnard that the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines would make a helicopter assault to the south in order to relieve the pressure on his battalion.¹¹

Lieutenant Colonel Tullis J. Woodham, Jr., the commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines, remembered that his unit had been on alert for Allen Brook and was to relieve the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines. In fact the 27th Marines, under Colonel Adolph G. Schwenk, Jr., was scheduled to take responsibility for the operation from the 7th Marines later that day. Early on the morning of the 17th, Lieutenant Colonel Woodham had received orders to truck

his battalion down to Liberty Bridge and then cross the bridge on foot to make the planned relief. At this point, he had only two of his companies with him, Companies K and L. His Company M was the Da Nang Air Base security company and Company I, of course, was attached to Barnard's battalion. Upon learning of the predicament of his Company I, Woodham conferred with Schwenk and agreed upon the helicopter assault. For the time being, Woodham's battalion would be under the operational control of the 7th Marines.¹²

After some unexpected delays in the arrival of the aircraft and in coordination with the air preparation of the landing zone, about 1500 on the 17th, Marine helicopters finally brought the battalion into An Tam (1) about 1,000 meters southeast of Le Nam (1). Even

Heavily sweating Marines from the Command Group of the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines assist in the evacuation of an injured Capt Robert R. Anderson, who had attempted to reach the embattled Company I. With temperatures reaching 110 to 120 degrees, heat was as much the enemy as the NVA.

Photo courtesy of Col Tullis J. Woodham, Jr. USMC (Ret)



as the battalion landed, it came under mortar and long-range weapons fire. Despite the enemy fire, the two Marine companies immediately attacked northward to link up with the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines. With extensive air and artillery support, Company K, 27th Marines broke through the enemy defenses in Le Nam (1), and finally linked up with Company I about 1930 that evening. According to Lieutenant Colonel Woodham, as darkness approached, the North Vietnamese resistance ceased and they began to withdraw from the battle area.¹³

The heavy fighting for Le Nam (1) had resulted in 39 Marines dead and 105 wounded as opposed to 81 North Vietnamese dead. Company I especially had suffered grievous losses. Of the total Marine casualties in the battle, Company I had sustained 15 killed and 50 wounded. Among the dead were Captain Thomas H. Ralph and two of his platoon leaders. The casualties of the company may have been even higher if it had not been for the heroics of Private First Class Robert C. Burke. A machine gunner with the company, he quickly took his weapon "and launched a series of one-man assaults" against the enemy emplacements. Providing covering fire, he permitted other members of Company I to come up and remove the wounded from exposed positions. He continued to advance upon the enemy and to suppress enemy fire until he fell mortally wounded. He was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously.¹⁴

During the night of 17–18 May, the two Marine battalions, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines and the 3d Battalion, 27 Marines, remained in separate positions, but in radio contact. Lieutenant Colonel Barnard had moved to a night position near Cu Ban (4), about 1,000 meters to the northwest of Le Nam (1), while Lieutenant Colonel Woodham retained his command group at An Tam (1). About 1900, Lieutenant Colonel Barnard had turned over operational control of Company I to Woodham and then began preparations to start out at dawn on the 18th for Liberty Bridge. Essentially, Operation Allen Brook was over for the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, which would leave as planned the next day and be replaced by the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines.¹⁵

By that time the 27th Marines, under Colonel Schwenk, had assumed responsibility for Operation Allen Brook which would continue in the Go Noi. On the morning of the 18th, Lieutenant Colonel Woodham began to expand his perimeter around Le Nam (1). About 0930, the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines began to take sniper fire from Le Bac (2), about 300 meters to

the north. Lieutenant Colonel Woodham immediately sent Companies K and L to clear out what he thought were a relatively few snipers. The "few snipers" turned out to be a formidable North Vietnamese force which quickly brought the Marine attack to a halt. Under an "exceedingly heavy" volume of fire, the lead elements of both Companies I and K remained isolated and unable to maneuver. Woodham called for both artillery and air, but their effectiveness was limited because of the proximity of the Marines to the enemy. Both companies, but especially Company K, sustained several casualties and the intolerable heat soon became as much a factor as the enemy bullets.¹⁶

At 1500 that afternoon, Marine helicopters brought in Company M, which had already been alerted to replace the combat-impaired Company I. As the latter company boarded the helicopters for the return trip to Da Nang, Woodham thrust the newly arrived Company M into the battle for Le Bac (2). With the reinforcements, Company K, which had taken the most casualties, was able to pull back and Lieutenant Colonel Woodham placed it in reserve. The fighting raged on until the night when the NVA withdrew. The Marine companies pulled back to Le Nam (1) and Woodham brought in air and artillery to the rear of the former NVA positions. The battalion had sustained serious casualties: 15 Marines were dead, another 35 were wounded, and 94 troops had succumbed to the heat. In and around the abandoned enemy position lay 20 dead North Vietnamese.

Operation Allen Brook would continue to focus through 27 May largely on the Cu Ban, Phu Dong, and Le Bac village complexes. Beginning with the action of the 16th, the 7th, and later the 27th Marines, were in a more or less a conventional battle against well dug-in and relatively fresh and well-trained North Vietnamese regulars. Colonel Schwenk, the 27th Marines commander, commented that while the enemy troops did not initiate any offensive actions, they fought back "tenaciously" from concealed positions within treelines and in the hamlets themselves. To offset the Marine advantage in supporting arms, the NVA would allow "the point of advancing units to pass through" and then open up on the "main body" with both intense small arms fire and mortars. At this close range, the Marine command could then make only limited use of artillery and air support.¹⁷

To counter this tactic, the 27th Marines used heavy preparatory fires from both U.S. Navy gunfire ships offshore and artillery in coordination with air strikes to blast the enemy out of their bunkers and trenches



Photo courtesy of Col Tullis J. Woodham, USMC (Ret)

LtCol Tullis J. Woodham, Jr., commander of the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines, left, waits to hear about the situation in Le Bac from his operations officer, Maj Ernest T. Fitzgerald, using the radio, during Allen Brook.

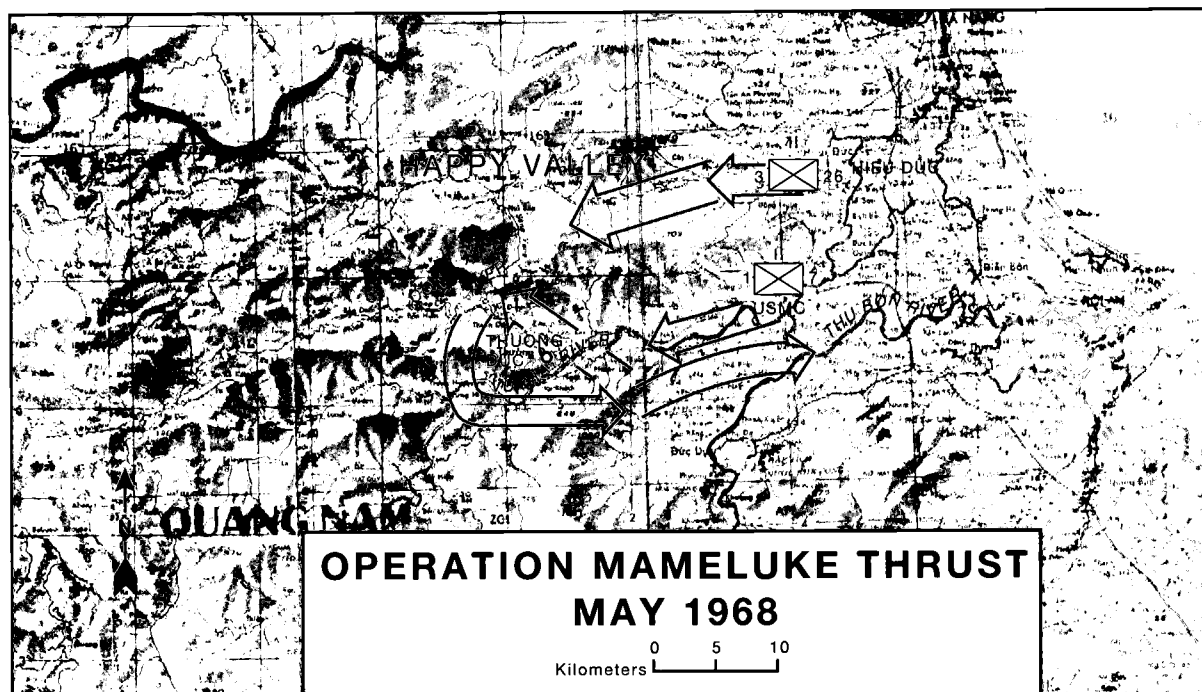
before moving into an area. If a Marine unit encountered heavy small arms fire, it was either to hold its position or move back so that supporting arms could be employed as much as possible under the circumstances. Colonel Schwenk remarked that tanks with their 90mm guns proved most effective in these circumstances, both with high explosive rounds to breach enemy fortifications and with canister rounds against troops in the open. Schwenk wrote that once he committed the tanks, "the enemy would break contact almost immediately." The tanks were also at a disadvantage, however, in that the terrain "caused . . . [them] to become channelized making them highly vulnerable to RPG fire and mines." On 24 May, two Marines from the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines, Corporal Richard W. Buchanan from Company M and Private First Class Charles R. Yordy, from Company K, were later awarded the Navy Cross for their actions that day in Le Bac (1) about 800 meters northwest of Le Bac (2). The fight for Le Bac (2) lasted until the 27th and featured some of the heaviest combat of the campaign until a torrential rain storm ended the fighting. Lieutenant Colonel Donald N. Rexroad, the commander of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, remembered

that his battalion near the end of the month overran "an apparent NVA regimental command post."¹⁸

Casualties on both sides had been heavy. For the entire operation through the end of May, the Marines reported to have killed over 600 of the enemy. They themselves sustained since the beginning of the operation 138 killed, 686 wounded including 576 serious enough to be evacuated, and another 283 non-battle casualties that had to be evacuated. The number of heat-induced "non-battle casualties" had soared towards the end because of the extreme high temperatures averaging almost 110 degrees and the physical exertion expended in the firefights. In many engagements, the number of heat casualties equalled or exceeded the number of Marines killed and wounded.^{19*}

In Operation Allen Brook, the Marines believed they had broken the back of a planned enemy attack on

*The 7th Marines in its account reported only seven non-battle casualties through 17 May. It can be assumed then that the bulk of the heat casualties occurred after the 27th Marines took over the operation. For the period 4–17 May, the 7th Marines account showed that the Marine units in Allen Brook sustained 85 killed and 359 wounded, 323 of whom were evacuated in addition to the non-battle casualties. 1/7 AAR, Allen Brook.



Da Nang. Colonel Hall of the 7th Marines later wrote that his 3d Battalion's reentry into the Go Noi under cover of darkness in the early morning hours of 16 May foiled the designs of the enemy which had begun to stage its forces. Hall observed that the North Vietnamese unit engaged by his units was from the *36th Regiment, 308th NVA Division*. According to a North Vietnamese prisoner from the *2d Battalion* of that regiment, his unit had departed North Vietnam in February and only arrived in the Go Noi the night of the 15th with orders to assault allied positions north of the Thu Bon and Ky Lam Rivers. The 27th Marines would engage both the *2d* and *3d Battalions* of the *36th* during the fighting in the Cu Ban and Le Bac complex.²⁰

The appearance of the *36th Regiment* in the Go Noi was of some concern to the Marine command. III MAF and the 1st Marine Division had expected to find elements of the *2d NVA Division* which previously had used the sector during the Tet offensive. This was the first evidence that any unit of the *308th NVA Division* had ventured so far south. There were already indications that the North Vietnamese had built up their regular forces in the Da Nang sector. From 16–25 May, just to the east of the Marine units on the Go Noi, the 51st ARVN regiment, reinforced by two Ranger battalions, in a series of running battles engaged approximately two enemy battalions. While sustaining casualties of 53 dead and 144 wounded, the ARVN claimed to have killed 284 of the enemy during this period.

Mini-Tet and Operation Mameluke Thrust, May 1968

By mid-May it was apparent that the enemy buildup in the Go Noi sector was part and parcel of the long-awaited second phase of the enemy's "Tet" offensive. Outside of the flareups in the capital city of Saigon and especially in the eastern DMZ near Dong Ha* with some of the bloodiest combat of the war, the renewed fighting elsewhere was only a pale reflection of the first "Tet." Called "Mini-Tet" by the allies, this second enemy offensive largely confined itself to rocket and mortar fire and small ground probes against the major bases and attacks against the most vulnerable of the Special Forces camps near the Laotian border.

Still the enemy "Mini-Tet" could not be taken lightly. At Da Nang, in all probability it was the Marine thrust into the Go Noi that forestalled a renewed enemy ground assault on either the airfield or city itself. While enemy infantry units were unable to penetrate the Marine defenses, NVA rocketeers increased their efforts throughout I Corps. [See Chart] At Da Nang, from 5 May through 29 May, enemy rockets fell on major installations, including Marble Mountain, the main airfield, the FLC, and III MAF headquarters, on 12 separate occasions with the highest number of incidents, 4, on the first day of the attacks. In the Da Nang TAOR,

*See Chapter 15.

ENEMY EFFORTS AGAINST MAJOR III MAF BASES: MAY 1968

DANANG

DATE	TIME	INSTALLATION	TYPE ATTACK	CASUALTIES	MATERIAL DAMAGE
5 May	0120	III MAF Hq	5-122mm Rkts	4 KIA, 8 WIA	Minor
5 May	0150	Airbase	1-122mm Rkt	None	None
5 May	0200	FLC	15-122mm Rkts	3 KIA, 15 WIA	Minor
5 May	0600	FLC	5-122mm Rkts	None	None
8 May	2100	NSA Bridge Cargo Complex	4-122mm Rkts	None	None
9 May	0031	Airbase	4-122mm Rkts	None	None
9 May	0155	Airbase	5-122mm Rkts	5 WIA	1 Air Force F-101 and 1 C-130 (light), 1 crater in runway
11 May	2345	Airbase	6-140mm Rkts	None	2 EA-6A and 1 RF-4B (minor), 1 crater in runway
12 May	1758	Airbase	4-122mm Rkts	1 WIA	2 VNAF A-1 (minor)
22 May	0004	FLC	12-122mm Rkts	1 WIA	102 1/2 ton trucks and 1 supply building damaged
29 May	0140	Airbase	5-140mm Rkts	None	1 C-117 (substantial) and 1 TA-4F (limited)

MARBLE MOUNTAIN

DATE	TIME	INSTALLATION	TYPE ATTACK	CASUALTIES	MATERIAL DAMAGE
5 May	0151	Air Facility	41 Rds Mtr/Rkts	1 WIA	2 CH-53 (minor)
12 May	1905	Air Facility	20 Rds Rkts	1 KIA, 17 WIA	4 CH-53 (2 substantial, 2 minor), 3 CH-46 and 1 O-1 (minor)
20 May	0120	Air Facility	11 Rds Mtr	3 WIA	7 UH-1E (1 substantial, 1 minor, 5 limited), 4 CH-46 (limited), Control Tower (minor) and Base Operations Building (minor)
22 May	0211	Air Facility	12 Rds Mtr	4 WIA	2 CH-46 (limited), 2 UH-1E (minor)

CHU LAI

DATE	TIME	INSTALLATION	TYPE ATTACK	CASUALTIES	MATERIAL DAMAGE
5 May	0151	MAG-13 and Runway	27-122mm Rkts	None	3 F-4B (minor), 1 HAWK missile launcher and 3 missiles destroyed
8 May	1750	MATCU-67	2-122mm Rkts	1 KIA, 2 WIA	Ground Approach Radar Installation destroyed
11 May	2207	MAG-13 Ordnance Area	3-122mm Rkts	None	Minor
14 May	2317	MAG-13 Barracks Area	2-122mm Rkts	2 KIA, 15 WIA	1 Living Quarters destroyed, 5 Living Quarters and 1 Supply Building damaged
23 May	0155	MAG-13 Area	10-122mm Rkts	None	MAG-13 PX destroyed
26 May	0125	Runway	7-122mm Rkts	None	None

PHU BAI/CAMP EVANS/CAMP EAGLE

DATE	TIME	INSTALLATION	TYPE ATTACK	CASUALTIES	MATERIAL DAMAGE
5 May	0205	Camp Eagle	14-Rkts	None	None
19 May	1925	Camp Evans	12-122mm Rkts	1 KIA, 13 WIA	5 US Army helicopters destroyed, 107 helicopters and 6 fixed wing aircraft damaged
21 May	0030-0630	Camp Eagle	300 Rds 122mm Rkt/82mm Mtr, and Ground Atk	8 KIA, 20 WIA	Minor
21 May	0057	Phu Bai (Camp Hochmuth)	153-82mm Mtr	33 WIA	Minor
27 May	0250	Phu Bai Airfield	98-82mm Mtr	5 KIA, 32 WIA	5 US Army fixed wing aircraft (minor), 6 CH-46 (minor), 6 UH-1E and 3 CH-53 (limited)

QUANG TRI

DATE	TIME	INSTALLATION	TYPE ATTACK	CASUALTIES	MATERIAL DAMAGE
5 May	0310	New Quang Tri Airfield	20-122mm Rkts	None	1 CH-46 destroyed, 2 UH-34 and 1 UH-1E (limited)
17 May	0950	Old Airfield (South of Quang Tri City)	4-122mm Rkts	4 WIA	3 US Army CH-47 (substantial)



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371543

Under a covering smoke screen, Company D, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines crosses the Vu Gia River in Operation Mameluke Thrust. The battalion would follow the river into the western highlands near Thuong Duc.

the 7th Marines alone reported 77 mortar incidents as opposed to 15 in April.²¹

The whereabouts of the *2d NVA Division* also was worrisome. In their one major success during Mini-Tet, on 10–12 May 1968, elements of that North Vietnamese division had overrun the Special Forces camps at Ngog Tavak and Kham Duc in western Quang Tin Province near the Laotian border, about 60 miles southwest of Da Nang. Concerned about the buildup of enemy forces in the Go Noi and to the west near the Special Forces Camp at Thuong Duc about 35 miles closer to Da Nang than Kham Duc, General Cushman had few troops to commit to the relief of the other two Special Forces camps. Supported by both Generals Abrams and Westmoreland, Cushman ordered the evacuation of Kham Duc.*

Even before the abandonment of Ngog Tavak and Kham Duc, Cushman had planned an operation in the western highlands to include the region near Thuong Duc. On 9 May, III MAF had directed Major General Robertson, the 1st Marine Division commander, to conduct a spoiling attack deep into the valley region west of Da Nang, that was eventually to

be codenamed “Mameluke Thrust.” While Allen Brook in the Go Noi delayed the initiation of the new operation, the possibility that the NVA units that overran the more southerly Special Forces camp might next try to take Thuong Duc was an ever-present consideration. This was the reason for the replacement of the 7th Marines’ battalions in the Go Noi by the 27th Marines.²²

The 1st Marine Division’s mission for Operation Mameluke Thrust was to conduct “offensive operations to find, fix and destroy en[emy] forces in [the] tactical area of interest.” The NVA units believed to be located in the area of operations included the *31st Regiment*, *341st Division*, the *368B Rocket Regiment*, two unidentified battalions, the headquarters of *Military Region V*, and possibly, command elements of *Group 44*. The expected duration of the operation was 21 days.²³

On 19 May, the 1st Marine Division struck. Colonel Hall’s 7th Marines, with its own 1st Battalion, attacked west along the Song Vu Gia toward Thuong Duc. Further north, Colonel Bruce F. Meyers’ 26th Marines, which the previous day, on short notice, had deployed south to Da Nang from Quang Tri, attacked with its 3d Battalion into the hills overlooking the eastern end of the Song Lo Dong Valley—known to

* See Chapter 26 for more details about the fight and evacuation of Ngog Tavak and Kham Duc.

the Marines as "Happy Valley."* The 1st Reconnaissance Battalion placed Stingray patrols under the operational control of the two regiments to support the operation and, as the attack progressed westward, the artillerymen of Lieutenant Colonel Clayton V. Hendricks' 11th Marines moved firing batteries forward to keep up with the advance.

By the end of May, Lieutenant Colonel William S. Fagan's 1st Battalion, 7th Marines had swept the hills along both banks of the Song Vu Gia and its tributary, the Song Con, to a point four kilometers beyond Thuong Duc, and returned to their starting point at the eastern end of the valley. Lieutenant Colonel John C. Studt's 3d Battalion, 26th Marines was deep in the jungle-clad hills south of Happy Valley.** Neither unit made significant contact with the enemy, but both found large supply caches. While the much-heralded enemy "Mini-Tet" offensive appeared to have spent itself at least in the Da Nang area of operations, the 1st Division decided to keep both Operations Allen Brook and Mameluke Thrust going and carry the fight to the enemy in his former strongholds.

Operation Allen Brook Continues

During the last four days of May, the 1st Marine Division rotated fresh units into the Allen Brook area of operations. Lieutenant Colonel Frederick J. McEwan's 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, veterans of the defense of Khe Sanh, arrived on the 26th, and Lieutenant Colonel John E. Greenwood's 1st Battalion, 27th Marines relieved Lieutenant Colonel Woodham's 3d Battalion, 27th Marines two days later. As May

ended, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines departed Go Noi Island and became the 1st Marine Division reserve.²⁴

Thereafter, III MAF maintained at least two battalions in Operation Allen Brook. At the beginning of June, both the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines and the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines were involved, still under the control of the 27th Marines headquarters. The 1st Marine Division expanded the area of operations to include the 27th Marines forward command post at Liberty Bridge, as well as about 35 square kilometers of rice farming area southwest of Go Noi Island.

The regiment's orders called for an ongoing "search and clear" operation, a euphemism for the tedious process of methodically searching an area for enemy personnel, facilities, supplies, and equipment. When carried out to the degree of thoroughness which provided a measure of success, the procedure was slow and sometimes ponderous. The extreme heat encountered during Operation Allen Brook, combined with terrain that included man-high elephant grass, as well as a hostile, uncooperative local population, and frequent encounters with boobytraps and mines, made the "search and clear" mission far more challenging than its name implied.

On the morning of 1 June, a flight of nine Lockheed C-130 Hercules aircraft conducted what was accurately known as an "inferno" mission, dropping more than 31,000 gallons of fuel in 55 gallon drums with igniters attached. While the intent was to burn away a considerable portion of the island's foliage, the mission was not as successful as desired due to excessive dispersion of the fuel and a heavy thunderstorm which followed the drop.²⁵

After this disappointment, the two battalions of Marines began the process of physically searching the area for signs of the enemy. The Marines trudged steadily across the island, from west to east and then back to the west again. Short, sharp contacts resulted when enemy troops fired from well-concealed positions, causing the Marines to return fire and call for supporting arms. Upon overrunning the area from which the enemy had fired, the Marines usually found little or nothing. Occasionally, Marines detonated mines or boobytraps (referred to as "surprise firing devices" in the reporting system), often disguised as soft-drink cans, tea bags, or even "Chieu Hoi" leaflets.^{26***} At night, with the Marines in defensive positions, the enemy would

*Colonel Meyers recalled that he "received an excellent briefing from Lieutenant Colonel [Charles E.] Mueller [whose battalion, the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines] . . . had operated on the western edge of the valley for three weeks." Meyers described Happy Valley as having a triple canopy, with the first layer consisting of dense Kunai grass, elephant grass, and thick vines, extending up to 20 feet. The second layer contained trees rising up to 60 feet, and the third layer consisted of large teak, mahogany, and ironwood trees which reached heights of 110 feet. Colonel Meyers stated that he knew some jungle techniques, having "done deep jungle patrols with the Gurkhas in Malaya in their campaign in 1959 . . ." Col Bruce F. Meyers, Comments on dtaft, dtd 20Feb95 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Meyers Comments.

**Colonel Studt described the Happy Valley operation as "a change of pace for 3/26, operating under triple canopy, constantly on the move." He observed that enemy tactics counted "on neutralizing our normally superior supporting arms by knocking down our point elements close in to their positions." Studt stated that, rather than walk blindly into any ambush, "we used dogs extensively . . . consequently in the several months that we spent operating in Happy Valley, we never had a man ambushed, although we lost a few dogs." Col John C. Studt, Comments on draft, dtd 22Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

***A leaflet distributed by hand or airdrop as part of psychological operations in support of the "Chieu Hoi" or "Open Arms" Campaign, which urged enemy troops to rally to the government of South Vietnam.

fire on listening posts from close range, or use mortars to harass the main perimeters. These activities caused additional casualties and further frustration for the Marines, who could not strike back effectively.

By 3 June, the 27th Marines had found little evidence of the enemy, causing the 1st Marine Division to determine that the "recent lack of significant contact indicates enemy forces departed Allen Brook AO."²⁷ Accordingly, the division reduced the scale of Operation Allen Brook, ordering the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines to depart Go Noi Island for operations elsewhere, and shrinking the Allen Brook AO. It would now include only that portion of Go Noi Island west of the National Railroad and a small area on the north bank of the Song Thu Bon, opposite the island.

The 27th Marines ordered the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines to move westward along Route 537 on its departure from the island, continuing the "search and clear" process along the way. Simultaneously, the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines also would move westward, on the right flank of the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines.

By mid-morning on 5 June, the two battalions were approaching their final objectives, having lost 4 killed and 26 wounded to sniper fire and mines along the way. As Company D, 26th Marines, under First Lieutenant Daniel L. McGravey, neared the hamlet of Cu Ban (3), North Vietnamese hidden in a trenchline and bunkers to the south fired on the 1st Platoon. The Marines maneuvered to one flank, attempting to envelop the enemy, and Communist mortars joined the action. At the same time, 500 meters to the east, Company B, 26th Marines, under Captain James H. Champion, also came under heavy fire and had a platoon caught in the open, unable to maneuver.

As the Marines called for mortars, artillery, and air support to assist in suppressing the enemy fire, Lieutenant Colonel Greenwood, commanding the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines, dispatched his Company C, commanded by Captain Martin T. Farmer, to assist the beleaguered 1st Battalion, 26th Marines. Company C hurried southward and made contact with the northernmost flank of Company B, 26th Marines, then swung to the west and assaulted the nearby Communist positions. Almost immediately, Captain Farmer and his second in command were wounded by mortar fire. Attacking without "a proper base of fire" and without time to "adequately reconnoiter" enemy positions, Company C, said Lieutenant Colonel Greenwood later, "lost momentum, faltered, and stopped."²⁸

Company D, 26th Marines was still heavily engaged near Cu Ban (3) and now, both Company B, 26th Marines and Company C, 27th Marines were being held down by enemy fire 500 meters east of the hamlet. The Communists, fighting from well-covered and expertly concealed positions, kept up heavy fire with rifles, machine guns, and mortars. The Marines, long accustomed to the luxury of fire superiority, found that they were unable to employ their supporting arms effectively in such close quarters without endangering friendly troops.

As casualties mounted, helicopters landed under fire to evacuate the wounded. Two Sikorsky UH-34 "Sea Horse" helicopters suffered hits in the process, but neither were lost. In mid-afternoon, with the fight still raging, Company A, 27th Marines, accompanied by three tanks, departed Liberty Bridge to join the fray. Supported by the tanks and carefully using artillery and air support, the Marines attacked and overran the enemy positions.

The Marines lost 7 killed and 55 wounded in this hard-fought, but confused, action. They found 30 North Vietnamese dead. A machine gunner with Company C, 1st Battalion, 27th Marines summed up the battle from an infantryman's perspective: "We had a bad-ass fire fight...it lasted for awhile. Then we moved on."²⁹

Although the Marines had finally made solid contact with the enemy, the plan to reduce the Operation Allen Brook commitment to a single battalion remained in effect. On 6 June, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines left the area and elements of the 1st Engineer Battalion arrived with the heavy equipment needed for the new task assigned to Operation Allen Brook forces: the virtual razing of Go Noi Island. The new mission called for the 27th Marines to "provide support and protection for [an] engineer effort to systematically eliminate all fortifications, dwellings, harbor sites, and hedgerows in [the] AO."³⁰ The first area scheduled to be cleared was Cu Ban (3).

The clearing project presented many challenges especially since Go Noi Island was thoroughly infested with well-constructed enemy field fortifications. The typical Go Noi bunker, based on a deep hole, had overhead protection constructed from rails and ties from the nearby National Railroad. Some actually included concrete. Covered with earth and camouflaged effectively, these positions were invisible from the air and only barely apparent from the ground. In some areas, farmers had worked away the ground surrounding the



Photo courtesy of Col Tullis J. Woodham, Jr. USMC (Ret)

Carrying out a program of "total destruction," Marine engineers bulldoze the hamlets in the Go Noi after the civilian population has been evacuated.

bamboo groves for so long that the groves appeared to be raised on flat mounds of hard earth. The Communists burrowed under these groves to construct hidden bunkers with firing slits at ground level. In addition to the fortifications built by the NVA and VC for their own use, the hamlets contained bunkers built by the local populace for family protection. These bunkers, also built with materials salvaged from the National Railroad, featured sloped roofs which deflected bombs and artillery projectiles. So strong were these bunkers that some were undamaged by 2,000 pound bombs detonating 50 feet away.³¹

As the engineers went about the business of destroying bunkers and filling in trenchlines, Lieutenant Colonel Greenwood provided them security and continued a program of aggressive patrolling with his four companies. Contact with the enemy remained sporadic. As before the battle at Cu Ban, the enemy contented themselves with occasional sniping, attacks on listening posts, harassing mortar fire on company night positions, and an ever-increasing number of mines and boobytraps. Marines continued to fall prey to heat, as well as to enemy action, for the daily temperature averaged 100 degrees, with humidity greater than 80 percent. In the still, thick air, heat casualties sometimes ran as high as 10 percent, causing commanders to limit troop activity to the early morning and late afternoon. While moving, the Marines did not carry excess equipment, leaving behind even their flak

jackets. To further exacerbate the Marine problems with the intense heat, the enemy contaminated the water wells in the area with oil and dead animal carcasses and the local river water was seemingly impervious to the attempts to purify it with halazone tablets.^{32*}

The battalion continued the "search and clear" routine (while the engineers gave a whole new meaning to the "clearing" aspects of the mission) without significant contact until 15 June. At 0330 that morning, behind a curtain of B-40 rockets and heavy automatic weapons fire, Communist troops fell upon Company B's night position near the National Railroad. The Marines returned fire with all organic weapons, from rifles to antitank rockets, and called for artillery fire support. In the face of Company B's tenacious defense, the North Vietnamese broke off their attack and attempted to flee, but Company B Marines pursued the broken enemy into the night, ending the engagement decisively. The next day, the Marines tallied 21 dead North Vietnamese, all victims of the abortive attack. Company B suffered only three wounded.

The 1st Marine Division ordered the area of operations extended to permit the Allen Brook forces to venture east of the National Railroad in pursuit of the enemy. Early on 19 June, an ad hoc force composed of elements of Companies B and D (under the command

*Halazone tablets were carried by the individual Marine for use in purifying locally gathered water.

of the executive officer of Company B) ran into a North Vietnamese force near the hamlet of Bac Dong Ban. One Marine platoon immediately went to ground in the face of overwhelming enemy fire. As the Marines called for air and artillery, another ad hoc company (also composed of elements of Companies B and D) moved to the rescue under the command of Company B's commanding officer, First Lieutenant Richard M. Wozar.

The North Vietnamese were thoroughly dug in, occupying a line of trenches and bunkers with their backs to the Song Ky Lam. For nine hours, the battle raged with neither side able to gain the upper hand. Finally, at 1800, the battalion command group, with Company A and a platoon from Company C, arrived and attacked from the west. Swinging northward, the reinforcements assaulted the enemy positions while Companies B and D provided a base of fire. By 1900, the Marines overwhelmed the enemy, suffering 6 dead, 19 wounded, and 12 heat casualties. By noon the next day, the Marines found 17 North Vietnamese dead.³³

The fight at Bac Dong Ban was the 1st Battalion's last major battle in Operation Allen Brook. After completing a sweep of the eastern portion of Go Noi Island, they departed the area on 23 June and in their place, the 2d Battalion, 27th Marines assumed responsibility for Operation Allen Brook. That night the North Vietnamese welcomed the fresh battalion to Go Noi Island with 60 rounds of mortar fire on Companies E, F, and H.

The 2d Battalion, tasked to continue the land clearing operations on Go Noi Island, arrived intent on carrying out a program of "total destruction." Their policy included elimination of natural assembly areas, concealing foliage, treelines, bamboo groves, hedgerows, trenchlines, fighting holes, caves, bunkers, tunnels, building structures, and any natural or man-made feature providing cover. Material which could be used to build bunkers, such as concrete blocks, beams, posts, pillars, and tree trunks, would be destroyed by crushing or burning. In the words of the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Albert W. Keller, "we were to level that island."³⁴

The 2d Battalion experienced only light enemy contact throughout its stay at Go Noi Island. The enemy appeared only in small groups, usually fleeing when sighted by the Marines. Because of the sporadic nature of enemy contact, much of the battalion's efforts centered on land clearing. In one 18-day period, the engineers completely leveled the largest forested area on Go Noi Island.³⁵ Lieutenant Colonel Keller later remarked that "by the time we destroyed and leveled that whole area . . . it looked almost like a parking lot for a major ball



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A650927
Two Marines from BLT 2/7 step gingerly through muck and water in a narrow ravine during Operation Swift Play in the Da The Mountain area south of the Go Noi. The unauthor-ized floppy hat worn by the Marine in the rear probably provides more protection from the elements than the helmet.

park in the United States."³⁶ As part of its land clearing effort, the battalion arranged two air-delivered herbicide missions which "were found to be quite effective."³⁷

On 16 July, the 2d Battalion, 27th Marines departed Go Noi Island, having reported killing 144 enemy at a cost of 4 Marines dead and 147 wounded. Simultaneously, the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines moved into the area and assumed responsibility for Operation Allen Brook. The character of the operation remained unchanged as the companies of the 3d Battalion alternated between patrolling and providing security for the engineers who were methodically scraping the island clean. The Communists continued to avoid significant engagements, but they did muster the temerity to fire on the aircraft which sprayed the island with herbicides on 18 July and 21 July. Meanwhile, the Marines continued to fire on small groups of enemy or on Vietnamese voices heard in the night, then searched the areas later to find an occasional body or blood trail.*

*Colonel Tullis J. Woodham, Jr., at the time the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines commander, commented that he positioned a sniper and a 106mm recoilless rifle team on the north/south railroad trestle: "The sniper would spot and kill or wound an enemy soldier. As other enemy forces would attempt to aid the dead or wounded NVA the 106 would take them under fire." Col Tullis J. Woodham, Jr., Comments on draft, dtd 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Photo is from the Abel Collection

Two Boeing Vertol CH-46 helicopters from HMM-165 have landed troops from the 26th Marines in a landing zone in the An Hoa basin densely covered with elephant grass. The Marines will be taking part in Operation Mameluke Thrust.

Although it appeared that the NVA battalions once thought to be based on Go Noi Island were gone, intelligence sources indicated that the Communists would soon try to reoccupy the area.³⁸ At the request of the 1st Marine Division, Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 2/7 (Seventh Fleet Special Landing Force "B") launched Operation Swift Play on 23 July 1968, only 17 hours after having embarked on board amphibious shipping at the close of Operation Eager Yankee in Thua Thien Province.

Designed to complement Operation Allen Brook, Operation Swift Play was a surprise thrust into the Da The Mountain area, six kilometers south of Go Noi Island. After landing by helicopter, BLT 2/7 swept north toward the Song Chiem Son and the Allen Brook area of operations. During the week-long sweep, the Marines of BLT 2/7 uncovered numerous enemy caches and base areas, including what appeared to be a training center, complete with lecture hall, carefully hidden in the steep, forested mountains. On 31 July, BLT 2/7 crossed the Chiem Son to Go Noi Island and relieved the 3d Battalion, 27th Marines of responsibility for Operation Allen Brook. Three days later, the 27th Marines ended its participation in the operation altogether, passing control of BLT 2/7 to the 5th Marines, which had previously exchanged its area of operations near Phu Bai with the 26th Marines.

Land-clearing operations continued until the Communists launched their long-awaited "third offensive" on 23 August. With enemy activity on Go Noi Island only minimal, the 1st Marine Division terminated Operation Allen Brook so that the forces could be employed to battle the enemy forces threatening Da Nang. Company E remained behind temporarily to escort the engineers to Liberty Bridge while the remainder of BLT 2/7 departed by helicopter. On 24 August, as Company E and the engineer convoy of trucks and earth-moving equipment headed westward the enemy harassed them with sporadic sniper fire until they cleared Go Noi Island.

Operation Allen Brook lasted three and one half months and resulted in 917 enemy killed. An additional 11 were captured, and 2 rallied to the Government of Vietnam. The III MAF units which sought to bring Go Noi Island under government control lost 170 Marines and 2 sailors killed in action and a further 1,124 wounded. Even more fell to heat, disease, snakebite, accidents, and a host of other hazards. All the while they fought, Operation Mameluke Thrust continued in the west.

Mameluke Thrust Also Continues

On 3 June, General Robertson expanded the Mameluke Thrust area of operations eastward to include the Song Thu Bon-Song Tinh Yen valley.³⁹

The western portion of this basin was the "Arizona Territory" and the area on the east bank of the river was the An Hoa sector. While the Arizona Territory, like Go Noi Island, had been tightly in the grip of the Viet Cong for many years, the Marines had managed to maintain a presence at An Hoa, even while committed to the fighting on the nearby Go Noi. While the 26th Marines took control of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, General Robertson reinforced the 7th Marines with his only reserve, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines for operations in the An Hoa basin.

In the western sector of Mameluke Thrust under the 26th Marines, on 6 June, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines established a patrol base on Hill 1235 (known locally as Tho Thenon), the dominant peak of the massif which overlooked the Da Nang-Hoi An-Dai Loc Triangle, the Arizona Territory, Happy Valley, and the valley of the Song Thu Bon. At the same time, the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines established its own battalion patrol base about two kilometers to the south, atop Hill 1062.

In the 7th Marines portion of the operation, Lieutenant Colonel McEwan's 1st Battalion, 26th Marines began operations in the An Hoa area on the morning of 7 June.* It did not have to wait long for action. At 0730, while moving southwest from Liberty Bridge, Company B came under fire from a North Vietnamese force atop a low hill only 1,200 meters from the bridge. The rest of the battalion quickly joined the action. As the Marines maneuvered, the North Vietnamese poured on a heavy fire, including machine guns and RPGs. The Marines called for artillery and close air support, but the enemy doggedly held the hill for nine hours, finally melting away at day's end. Marine casualties totaled 17 killed in action and 46 wounded. They found 64 dead North Vietnamese.⁴⁰

In the mountains to the west, the enemy remained elusive, avoiding contact even at the risk of losing large caches and base areas to the Marines. On 9 June, Company L, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, under the command of Captain Jesse D. Bennett, captured a recently abandoned NVA hospital. The complex contained 125 beds, medical supplies (including U.S.-made antibiotics), a clean operating room, a sterilizing area, a kitchen, food, medical records, a system of

running water built with bamboo pipes, and 16 pounds of marijuana.^{41**}

On 11 June, acting on a prisoner's information, Company I, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines located what turned out to be the command post of the notorious *368B Rocket Regiment*. The quantity of equipment captured there was staggering: rocket warheads, plotting boards, fire control devices, drafting tools, compasses, binoculars, hundreds of uniforms, and items of personal equipment. The entire haul totaled 18 helicopter loads.⁴²

During the second week in June, the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines swept eastward, down from the mountains, then terminated participation in the operation. At the same time, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines moved northward from An Hoa to the area bounded by the Thu Bon, Ai Nghia, and La Tho Rivers known as "Dodge City," and Lieutenant Colonel Donald N. Rexroad's 3d Battalion, 5th Marines moved to An Hoa.

The action seemed to follow the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines. On 13 June, only two days after entering the Dodge City area, the battalion encountered a North Vietnamese force near the village of Ky Chau, one kilometer west of a line of ROK Marine blocking positions along the National Railroad. The Communists were cut off by the Song Ky Lam to the west and south, the ROK's to the east, and the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines attacking from the north. They resolutely defended their position using heavy machine guns, 60mm mortars, and RPGs. In a nine-hour battle, the Marines lost 3 killed and 24 wounded, killing 44 of the enemy in the process.⁴³ Late that night, as Company B lay in ambush at the junction of a trail and the railroad bed, approximately 30–50 North Vietnamese attempted to escape to the east. In the ensuing fight, 15 of the enemy died, with the Marines sustaining no casualties.

Two days later, the enemy again ran afoul of the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines. Two kilometers southeast of the 7th Marines' command post on Hill 55, a large North Vietnamese unit occupied a heavily fortified triangular-shaped position 500 meters wide, which included a trenchline and a number of bunkers. The

* Lieutenant Colonel McEwan related that Colonel Reverdy M. Hall, the commander of the 7th Marines, referred to him as the "magnet . . . [since] 1/26 always made contact with the enemy . . ." LtCol Frederick J. McEwan, Comments on draft, dtd 7Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).

** Colonel Bruce F. Meyers, the commander of the 26th Marines, related that under the Geneva Agreement, the medical supplies had to be used to treat captured prisoners of war. He remembered that all the supplies had to be evacuated out by helicopter. Among the supplies were cartons of brassieres and tampons, although there was no other indication of the presence of women. According to Meyers, "the battalion surgeon practically cried when he had to give up the finely crafted East German medical instruments. He lamented to me, 'Col. Meyers, these are better medical instruments than we get!'" Meyers Comments.

Marines fought the Communists through the afternoon of 15 June and into the early evening, making liberal use of close air support and artillery. When they overran the enemy positions at 1930, the Marines reported 84 North Vietnamese dead. Their own casualties were 7 killed in action and 15 wounded.⁴⁴

The action near Hill 55 marked the end of the sweep through the Dodge City area and the focus of Operation Mameluke Thrust moved once again to the western valleys. On 14 June, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines marched out from An Hoa, leaving Company-K to guard the fire support base, and crossed the Song Yen into the Arizona Territory. Just across the river from An Hoa, Company I came under attack. A Communist mortar round killed the company commander, a platoon commander, and the company gunnery sergeant and seriously wounded the company executive officer, First Lieutenant Joseph T. Campbell. As the only officer left alive, Lieutenant Campbell refused evacuation and assumed command of the company. He directed medevac helicopters into and out of the landing zone and organized suppressive fire on the Communist positions nearby. Before he himself could be

flown out, Lieutenant Campbell succumbed to his wounds. For his heroic action, he received the Navy Cross, posthumously.⁴⁵

Northeast of Thuong Duc, another dramatic action took place the following day when Company K, 3d Battalion, 26th Marines received mortar fire while escorting a convoy. Corporal David M. Sivak volunteered to recover a machine gun abandoned during the initial contact. He crept uphill toward the weapon until a North Vietnamese soldier in a nearby fighting hole spotted him and began throwing hand grenades. Although wounded in the chest by a fragment, Sivak emptied 12 full magazines from his M16 at his tormentor.

Sivak finally reached the machine gun and continued advancing into the enemy position. The NVA soldier suddenly stuck his head out from a hidden tunnel. Deciding against running toward his comrades for fear of being shot in the back, Corporal Sivak threw the machine gun at the North Vietnamese, who then ducked back into the tunnel.

The enemy soldier looked out from the tunnel a second time and Sivak attacked with his bare hands.



Photo is from the Abel Collection

Marine Cpl David M. Sivak from the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines poses with various North Vietnamese weapons captured in a recent operation. In his hand he holds the K-Bar knife with which he killed a North Vietnamese soldier in a hand-to-hand fight.

The Communist fired his rifle, creasing Sivak's leg, and Sivak knocked the weapon from the man's hands. As the two grappled in the confines of the hole, the North Vietnamese bit the Marine savagely on the arm. Angered, Sivak bit him back, then drew his Kabar* and stabbed his opponent. The enemy soldier produced his own knife and stabbed Sivak in the back, but it was too late. The Marine had gained the upper hand. Sivak continued stabbing until he realized that the man had died.

Corporal Sivak remained in the hole until his comrades overran the hill. From captured documents, the Marines learned that the dead man was part of a nine-man North Vietnamese mortar forward observer team. Only when Sivak lost consciousness did his fellow Marines realize that he was wounded.

Corporal Sivak's adventure was not yet over. The story of his experience at the 1st Hospital Company is best told in his own words, recorded only three weeks after the incident:

I went to 1st Hospital and the doctor started checking me out for malaria and I told him that wasn't wrong and he said, "What's wrong?" . . . I said, "Well, I got stabbed in the back, I got bit in the arm, I got shrapnel in the chest, and I got shot in the leg." He couldn't believe it until he looked at it. He thought it was kinda funny. I wasn't in a mood to laugh at it. They thought I might have to get rabies shots from where I got bit in the arm, but I made out. All I had to do was get a tetanus shot. I was scared because rabies shots, you get 16 of them, they said, in the stomach. I got a weak stomach.⁴⁶

Corporal Sivak's platoon sergeant, reflecting on Sivak's harrowing experience, said only, "I think the bite was worse than the stab."⁴⁷

Retaining control of the 3d Battalion, the 26th Marines now absorbed the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines, as well as Lieutenant Colonel Roger H. Barnard's 3d Battalion, 7th Marines. At 0815 on 17 June, two of Barnard's companies conducted a helicopter assault into the Hill 1235 area and began the task of patrolling in the difficult terrain of Tho Thenon. After a respite of five days for refurbishing, the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines conducted a helicopter assault into the western end of Happy Valley, near the confluence of the Song Yang and the Song Iang. Meeting no opposition, the Marines turned to the now-familiar tasks of establishing a battalion patrol base and sweeping the assigned area.

On 19 June, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines moved westward from the fire support base at Hill 52, follow-

ing the Song Vu Gia toward Thuong Duc and searching the same ground covered one month before by the 3d Battalion at the beginning of the operation. It was the nature of the war that the only areas which were known to be secure were those areas physically occupied, thus, it was often necessary to retrace old steps in the search for the enemy. But this time, the Communists carefully avoided contact.

The 1st Battalion, 26th Marines continued to push through the valley, past Thuong Duc, then turned northward and followed the trace of the Song Yang to link up with the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines in Happy Valley on 27 June. The next day, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines linked up with the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines at the western edge of the Arizona Territory, southeast of Thuong Duc, then left the operation.

Southeast of An Hoa, in the Que Son area, the U.S. Army's Americal Division planned an offensive dubbed Operation Pocahontas Forest. The 1st Marine Division developed a plan to intercept Communist forces driven into the upper Song Thu Bon Valley by the Americal Division. At 1815 on 7 July, Battery A, 1st Battalion, 13th Marines established a fire support base on the west bank of the Song Thu Bon, near Nong Son, about 11 kilometers southwest of An Hoa.⁴⁸ Its mission was to provide artillery support to the Marine units which would be engaged in Operation Mameluke Thrust/Pocahontas Forest. The next morning, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines conducted a helicopter assault into a landing zone along the Khe Dienne, also just west of the Song Thu Bon, but about three kilometers upstream of the new fire support base at Nong Son.

Elsewhere, on 9 July, Mameluke Thrust began to expand once again as the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines attacked into the Dodge City area and the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines entered the Song Cu De Valley (called "Elephant Valley") to conduct the "Northern Phase" of the operation. In Elephant Valley, the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines found "no signs of well-utilized trails, prepared positions, [or] camp and harbor sites of any sizeable enemy force."⁴⁹ On 19 July, the battalion secured from the operation and returned to Phu Bai.

As intelligence reports continued to indicate the enemy planned a major attack on Da Nang during late July, the 1st Marine Division redistributed forces to meet the threat.⁵⁰ On 20 July, the 1st Battalion, 26th Marines shifted from its blocking position near Nong Son, back to An Hoa. Two days later, the 26th Marines, with the 1st and 3d Battalions, went north to Phu Bai,

*The Marine Corps issue combat knife.

relieving the 5th Marines in Operation Houston.

The expected Communist ground assault on Da Nang did not materialize during July. In place of it, the enemy launched the heaviest mortar and rocket attack on Da Nang since Tet. On 23 July, 143 rounds of rocket and mortar fire fell on the city and air base, killing 6 and wounding 76. The enemy fire damaged a runway, six helicopters, a Rockwell International OV-10 Bronco, and an Air Force Fairchild C-123 Provider. Recognizing the need for further protection against the rocket threat, III MAF earlier had directed the erection of a Da Nang Anti-infiltration System (DAIS) in cooperation with ARVN forces. At the beginning of July, generally following the outer trace of the Da Nang rocket belt, the 1st Marine Division had started work on the DAIS, which was to include concertina and barbed wire fencing, sensors, towers, and bunkers. By the end of the month, Marine engineers and ARVN had completed about 65 percent of the first of two increments of the planned project. Obviously, the uncompleted DAIS offered only a minor impediment to the enemy rocketeers during the month.⁵¹

The Marines attributed the enemy's failure to carry out the expected ground attacks in the city to the success of Operation Mameluke Thrust. As one unit history recorded:

Prisoners and documents continued to indicate that the enemy had a definite plan for infiltration of Da Nang city proper with sapper and related forces. . . . It appeared that *Group 44 (Quang Da Special Zone) Headquarters* endeavored to carry out such a plan . . . , but was unable to consummate the action due to interdiction of his forces prior to initiation of his offensive.⁵²

During the last week of July, Colonel Paul G. Graham's 5th Marines redeployed to An Hoa from Phu Bai and began operations in the An Hoa basin immediately. The day it arrived, the 2d Battalion moved to the field, northeast of the fire support base, and soon encountered numerous small North Vietnamese units. After these initial engagements, contact tapered off dramatically. By the end of the month, the enemy appeared to have evacuated the An Hoa area.

In the Arizona Territory, the month ended with an unusual sighting reported by a reconnaissance team. On 28 July, Stingray patrol "Scandinavia" sighted four Soviet-built PT-76 tanks and a wheeled vehicle barely 3,500 meters northwest of the An Hoa fire support base. An air observer confirmed the sighting and Scandinavia called for close air support and artillery fire on

the area, resulting in four secondary explosions.⁵³ The following morning, Teams Albrook and Scandinavia reported two vehicles, at least one of which was tracked, moving in circles about a kilometer northeast of the previous sighting. Scandinavia directed artillery and air attacks against the vehicles, but could not observe the target effectively. Later that day, an agent report told of two destroyed armored fighting vehicles in the same location as the first sighting.⁵⁴ To verify these reports, Companies D and F, 5th Marines searched the area of the sightings, but found no evidence of tanks.

August began with a significant enemy contact for Stingray patrol "Flaky Snow" in the Arizona Territory. At 0405 on 1 August, a company of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong rushed Flaky Snow's position from the north, using grenades, satchel charges, bangalore torpedoes, and RPG fire to overwhelm the Marines. The enemy withdrew immediately, having killed 5 Marines and wounded 11. To complicate matters further for Flaky Snow, the attack temporarily knocked its radio out of action, which prevented it from calling for help. The team got the radio working again at 0600, and called for the reaction force. Within 20 minutes, help arrived. The reaction force landed by helicopter, under fire from the west, to find all of the observation post's bunkers destroyed and a North Vietnamese flag flying over the position. The Flaky Snow Marines claimed to have killed seven of their attackers, but a search of the area revealed only three bodies.⁵⁵

The frequency of enemy contact continued to rise in the beginning of August. In the Arizona Territory during the first two days of the month, A Troop, 1st Squadron, 9th Cavalry, 1st Air Cavalry Division, under the operational control of the 5th Marines, killed 96 Communists in 30 hours.⁵⁶ The 5th Marines continued search and clear operations with Lieutenant Colonel Robert H. Thompson's 1st Battalion in the Arizona Territory and Lieutenant Colonel James W. Stemple's 2d Battalion northeast of An Hoa. Lieutenant Colonel Stemple recalled that his battalion "was invested from the An Hoa combat base to Liberty Bridge, and was involved in activity with the enemy on a daily basis"⁵⁷

At 0915, on 6 August, Companies E and F engaged a North Vietnamese company near the village of Cu Ban, scene of many fights between the Communists and Operation Allen Brook forces in the previous weeks. Corporal Robert G. Fante, a squad leader assigned to Company F, maneuvered his men forward, pressing home the attack on the Communist positions.

*See Chapter 28 for further discussion of the Da Nang barrier.

Spotting a 75mm recoilless rifle, he singlehandedly assaulted the position, capturing the weapon and killing or driving off its crew members. Corporal Fante continued to lead his squad on a rampage through the enemy's defenses, clearing bunkers with hand grenades and pursuing the retreating North Vietnamese. He was leading this advance when killed by enemy fire. For his courageous acts, Corporal Fante was awarded the Navy Cross posthumously.⁵⁸

After overrunning the enemy position, the Marines found 23 North Vietnamese dead and 34 tons of rice, in addition to the recoilless rifle captured by Corporal Fante. Fante was the only Marine killed in the fight, but 21 others and 1 Navy corpsman suffered wounds.⁵⁹ An additional 46 Marines sustained injuries when an aircraft accidentally dropped a load of napalm bombs on Company F's position during the fight. Lieutenant Colonel Stemple recalled that a bomb hit the reserve platoon of Company F and just missed his command group by a few yards.⁶⁰

The two battalions continued the search and clear operations in their assigned sectors for the next nine days without significant contact. The Marines searched caves, bunkers, and dwellings, patrolled roads and rice paddies, and killed Communists one or two at a time. Casualties continued to trickle into the hospitals and aid stations in the rear as Marines fell victim to the familiar enemy formula: mines, boobytraps, and sniper fire by day; harassing mortar fire by night.

Indications that the enemy was preparing to launch his expected offensive continued to build. On 10 August, acting on intelligence reports, the 1st Marine Division issued instructions directing subordinate units to prepare to assist in the defense of the DaNang vital area. The order called for reduced "day workloads . . . to allow adequate rest [for] all hands" and a concomitant increase in night activities. The tanks sighted in the Arizona Territory a few weeks earlier now caused a flurry of interest in reviewing and updating the division's antimechanized plans.⁶¹

On 16 August, "usually reliable sources, in addition to two counter intelligence agents" disclosed that the *402d Sapper Battalion*, the *R-20 Battalion*, and possibly a regimental headquarters were located three kilometers southeast of Liberty Bridge in the village of Chau Phong.⁶² The location of such a large concentration of enemy troops less than 30 kilometers south of Da Nang was a further indication that the enemy offensive would soon begin, accompanied by the previously anticipated sapper attacks on the city proper. The 1st Marine Division acted quickly,

ordering the 5th Marines to surprise the enemy battalions at Chau Phong and to destroy them in their staging areas.

At 2300, the night of 16 August, three Marine infantry battalions silently converged on the hamlet of Chau Phong (2). Lieutenant Colonel LeRoy E. Watson's BLT 2/7, participating in Operation Swift Play in the hills south of Go Noi Island, shifted into a blocking position 1,200 meters east of the objective along a major stream. Stemple's 2d Battalion, 5th Marines sealed the west side of the objective along another stream 2,000 meters from Chau Phong. The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, now under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Rufus A. Seymour, flew into An Hoa and conducted a night approach march into an assembly area near My Son (1), about five kilometers southwest of the Communist positions. H-hour was set for 0700, 17 August.⁶³

Lieutenant Colonel Ben A. Moore, Jr.'s gunners of the 2d Battalion, 11th Marines drew first blood with an artillery preparation that began at 0400 and lasted until 0700. The original plan called for the artillery barrage to be followed by a low-level air attack, also dropping smoke and CS gas on the objective area. According to Lieutenant Colonel Stemple, torrential rains after midnight, however, forced the cancellation of the air strikes until mid- and late-morning without the smoke or CS. The original plan called for his battalion to initiate a predawn "attack by fire" so as to confuse the NVA as to the direction of attack and to hold them in place. The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines was then to make the main assault attacking northeast into Chau Pong (2). Stemple's troops opened fire, according to plan, but he recalled that inadvertently, elements of BLT 2/7 moved in front of Seymour's battalion and delayed the main assault. About 200 North Vietnamese, however, attempted to flee to the east at 1200, and Companies F and G, BLT 2/7 were waiting for them. Marines of these two companies reported killing 53 of the enemy while suffering only 11 men wounded. At 1500, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines finally assaulted and captured the hamlet, finding "many enemy dead, weapons, equipment, and food supplies." The enemy cache yielded significant quantities of stores, including 88 tons of rice and enough medical supplies to support 500 men.⁶⁴

During the night of 17 August, the three battalions adjusted their lines. At first light, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines moved northward across a branch line of the National Railroad to search the hamlet of Chau Phong (1). At the same time, BLT 2/7 crossed

the stream toward the hamlet, then swung northward with orders to attack and seize the hamlets of La Thap (1) and Le Nam (3), which were about 1,500 meters north of Chau Phong. At 0700, Company E, BLT 2/7 engaged a North Vietnamese company defending a low hill just northeast of Chau Phong. The enemy troops, described as "fresh" and "determined," were well-equipped, even to the point of wearing helmets and body armor.⁶⁵ The Marines returned fire and attempted to envelop the enemy, but the determined defense put up by the North Vietnamese drove them to cover. Taking up positions 600 meters away, the Marines directed artillery fire and airstrikes (the latter including CS gas) on the enemy, driving them from the hill. The North Vietnamese left 12 dead in the position, while Company E lost 6 Marines killed, and 25 wounded.⁶⁶ On Company E's left, Company G, BLT 2/7 also encountered a North Vietnamese unit which similarly impeded the battalion's attack to the north. With BLT 2/7 bogged down by these pockets of resistance, the 5th Marines modified the original plan and ordered the

2d Battalion, 5th Marines to capture the hamlets of La Thap (1) and Le Nam (3).

At 1500, as Company G, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines approached the objective, they engaged an enemy platoon defending the hamlet of La Thap (1). The Marines advanced, returning fire, but enemy resistance increased. A five-hour shootout ensued, during which six flights of aircraft bombed the enemy, while the 2d Battalion, 11th Marines provided a heavy dose of artillery fire on the hamlet. At 2000, Company G assaulted and captured the position, killing 37 North Vietnamese and effectively ending the battle of Chau Phong. Seven Company G Marines died and 19 were wounded in the fight.⁶⁷

Operation Mameluke Thrust continued for some time. But soon after the battle for Chau Phong, the Communists launched their long-awaited offensive in the Da Nang area, diverting III MAF's energies to deal with the new threat. By this time in northern I Corps, the 3d Marine Division had launched its own offensive against the North Vietnamese Divisions in both the DMZ sector and in western Quang Tri Province.

PART IV

THE WAR CONTINUES:
OFFENSIVE AND
COUNTER-OFFENSIVE

CHAPTER 18

3d Division Takes the Offensive

*The Enemy Situation—The Offensive Takes Shape—The Eastern DMZ
The Pressure Continues—Into the Western Mountains—Southern Quang Tri and Thua Thien*

The Enemy Situation

In northern I Corps, enemy activity throughout Quang Tri Province was light and sporadic during the early days of June. With the virtual destruction of two regiments of the veteran *320th NVA Division* in the eastern sector of the DMZ in late May, enemy ground activity in the province's northeastern quadrant decreased markedly. What enemy activity there was, was generally limited to long-range rocket and artillery attacks on allied positions from within and north of the Demilitarized Zone. Although squad- and platoon-sized enemy units did engage wide-ranging allied patrols, no large North Vietnamese force attempted to attack allied installations or formations.

Further west, agent reports placed the *270th NVA Regiment* and *27th Independent Regiment* in Leatherneck Square, the area bounded by Con Thien (A-4), Gio Linh, Dong Ha, and Cam Lo. Intelligence analysts assumed that these two enemy units would not only attack allied installations in the region, but attempt to destroy the Cam Lo Refugee Resettlement Project and interdict Route 9.

Within the central portion of the province, units subordinate to the *Quang Tri Liberation Front* or *7th Front*, including elements of the *812th Regiment*, and the *808th* and *818th Separate Battalions*, although unlocated, were poised to venture out of their jungle sanctuaries on the Quang Tri-Thua Thien provincial border and launch attacks against Quang Tri City and surrounding allied bases. Forward elements of the three enemy units were known to be in the countryside surrounding the city, attempting to obtain rice and recruits.

In the western reaches of the province, centered on the Khe Sanh Plateau, the *304th NVA Division* was joined in late May by the *88th* and *102d Regiments*, *308th NVA Division*. The enemy regiments, which had arrived recently from Hanoi, were to reinforce the *304th* and launch attacks against Khe

Sanh Combat Base and Route 9, from Ca Lu west to the Laotian border. The number of enemy units located within the Demilitarized Zone area and in Quang Tri Province at the beginning of June was estimated at 36 infantry and 6 support battalions, and confirmed enemy combat strength placed at 23,100 troops.¹

The Offensive Takes Shape

Upon taking over in late May, the new 3d Marine Division commander, Major General Raymond G. Davis, found the maneuver elements of the division generally occupying fixed positions in four operational areas centered on the Demilitarized Zone from Cua Viet to Khe Sanh. In the coastal lowlands, or Napoleon-Saline area of operations, Colonel Milton A. Hull's 3d Marines and Lieutenant Colonel George F. Meyers' 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion occupied Camp Kistler at the Cua Viet's port facility. The 1st and 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, located nearby, conducted periodic sweeps of the area north and northwest of the port facility, while companies of Lieutenant Colonel Meyers' battalion occupied the C-4 strongpoint and conducted similar sweeps of the immediate area. Also under the operational control of the 3d Marines were elements of Lieutenant Colonel Michael V. Palatas' 1st Battalion, 9th Marines.

Northwest of Cua Viet, in the Kentucky area of operations, the 9th Marines under Colonel Richard B. Smith provided security for the outposts within the area of operations, from Gio Linh to Cam Lo, as well as the major lines of communications, Routes 1, 9, and 561. Under Smith's operational control was Lieutenant Colonel Francis J. Heath, Jr.'s 2d Battalion, 26th Marines which secured the strongpoints at Con Thien, A-3, C-2, and C-2 bridge, all strung along Route 561, a north-south provincial road stretching from the Demilitarized Zone to Cam Lo. The regimental headquarters and 1st and 3d Battalions, 26th Marines had been deployed to Da Nang on 18 May from the Quang Tri sector to

participate in the 1st Marine Division's operation Mameluke Thrust.*

Headquartered at Camp Carroll in the Lancaster II area of operations were Colonel Edward J. Miller's 4th Marines and a battalion of the 9th Marines. The 1st and 2d Battalions, 4th Marines, the latter organized as a battalion landing team (BLT), and the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines secured combat bases at Camp Carroll, Thon Son Lam, and Ca Lu, all centered on Route 9. At Ca Lu, under the operational control of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines was Lieutenant Colonel Daniel J. Quick's 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, which like the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines, was organized as a battalion landing team.**

The largest of the division's four operational areas was Scotland II, which encompassed the western third of Quang Tri Province. Primary responsibility for operations within this area lay with the 3d Marine Division's Task Force Hotel, a multi-battalion task force commanded by Assistant Division Commander, Brigadier General Carl W. Hoffman. Hoffman's task force consisted of two battalions of Colonel Stanley S. Hughes' 1st Marines, and the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines, under Lieutenant Colonel Jack W. Davis.

The three battalions under Brigadier General Hoffman's command were assigned the task of maintaining the defense of Khe Sanh Combat Base and the surrounding outposts on Hills 881, 861, 950, and other prominent terrain features. In addition, troops of the task force secured Route 9, the vital overland resupply route for the division's western-most fortified positions, from Landing Zone Stud and Ca Lu to Khe Sanh.

Providing artillery support for the division's ground elements were the four organic battalions of the 12th Marines under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Wilson A. Kluckman. A battery from the regiment, or another allied artillery unit under its operational control, was in position at every combat base and strongpoint, ready to support the maneuver battalions and to

respond to enemy attacks by fire on allied installations or populated areas.

With the ground elements of the division generally tied to fixed positions, the tactical effectiveness of such a disposition of forces was limited. A considerable number of troops were needed to defend these installations strung out along the Demilitarized Zone. In turn, these fixed installations presented lucrative targets for both North Vietnamese ground forces and artillery gunners. Beyond immediate allied patrol zones, large areas of Quang Tri Province virtually belonged to the enemy.

The overall tactical situation in late May, therefore, might be viewed as one of balance. On the one hand the North Vietnamese had been soundly defeated in their attempts against major Marine bases at Khe Sanh and Dong Ha. On the other, allied forces had not attempted to penetrate the enemy's large base areas nor attempted to disrupt his supply and infiltration routes deep in the mountainous jungles of western Quang Tri.

This tactical disposition of the division's forces would be turned around with General Davis' assumption of command. Buttressed by the presence of two U.S. Army divisions, which greatly strengthened troop density in northern I Corps, Davis prepared to take the war to the enemy. After reducing the number of troops at fixed positions, he placed the 3d Marine Division in a more mobile posture, characteristic of ongoing Army air cavalry and airborne operations. "The way to get it done," Davis later recalled, "was to get out of those fixed positions and get mobility, to go and destroy the enemy on our terms—not sit there and absorb the shot and shell and frequent penetrations that he was able to mount."²

As Lieutenant General Rosson's deputy at Provisional Corps, Vietnam, Davis had observed first-hand the mobile operations of the 1st Air Cavalry Division. With extensive helicopter support, air cavalry troops "forgot about real estate" and applied the necessary forces directly against enemy troop dispositions.³ Drawing not only on these experiences, but also on classical amphibious concepts, and deep vertical envelopment techniques developed during the late 1950s, he devised a synthesis that combined elements of all three.⁴

Davis' concept of mobile operations was dependent upon adequate and timely helicopter support. "I was very fortunate in this," he was later to state, "that the later [and more powerful] model of the CH-46 was arriving in-country in large numbers." In addition,

*See Chapter 17 for Mameluke Thrust. Colonel John C. Studt, who commanded the 3d Battalion, 26th Marines, observed that his battalion's stay at Quang Tri "was like R&R (rest and recreation) for the troops after Khe Sanh." Much of the mission around Quang Tri for the battalion involved rice protection and night security. He recalled that they had some success with "the idea of building small ambush killer teams around experienced deer hunters, i.e. if you can ambush a deer, you should be able to ambush a VC." Col John C. Studt, Comments on draft, dtd 22Nov94 (Vietnam Comment File).

**BLT 2/4 and BLT 3/1 were the landing forces of SLFs Alpha and Bravo, respectively. Both battalions had been ashore and attached to the 3d Marine Division since late January. On 3 June, BLT 3/1 returned to the operational control of SLF Bravo. See Chapter 30.

due to his close working relationship with General Rosson, Davis had the promise of Army helicopter support if needed.

This was a fine thing about my command out there, Rosson...guaranteed me that when we'd go into these tactical operations, I never needed to look back over my shoulder a single time and wonder if I was going to be supported. I knew that they were going to give me the helicopters I would need."⁵*

More important, however, was the creation of Provisional Marine Aircraft Group 39 at Quang Tri in April and the assignment later, initially on a temporary basis, of Assistant Wing Commander, Brigadier General Homer S. Hill, to the 3d Division headquarters. Acting as the Marine air commander for northern I Corps, General Hill, as Davis noted, "had enough authority delegated to him from the wing, where he could execute things, he could order air units to do things." Highly flexible mobile operations and the lives of individual Marines taking part in such operations would be totally dependent upon air. Without a responsive air commander on the scene, these operations, Davis continued, would be "a shambles" and Marines would suffer.⁶ With helicopter transport assured, division Marines would begin to move from relatively static positions south of the Demilitarized Zone, into the mountainous regions of Quang Tri Province in search of the enemy, his infiltration routes, and his supplies.^{**}

In addition to moving the division toward a more mobile posture, General Davis reinstituted unit integrity. As a result of the promulgation of the M series table of organization, Marine battalions were delegated the capability of self-administration. The regiment was to be "responsive to an administrative concept in which fiscal, personnel, supply and maintenance functions and transactions usually proceed directly from subordinate elements to the division."⁷ The regiment, therefore, was essentially a tactical headquarters.

*Colonel Vaughn R. Stuart, who assumed command of the 3d Marines in July, commented, however, that there were very few Army helicopters available to the 3d Marine Division except for command and control and the Army Sikorsky CH-54 Flying Crane. He recalled a situation when he was sent only two CH-46 helicopters and that "it took all day and all that night to get the infantry and artillery into position and ready to fire missions at first light the next morning." He wondered where the helicopter support from the Army and Provisional Corps was on that occasion. Col Vaughn R. Stuart, Comments on draft, dtd 20Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File), hereafter Stuart Comments.

**See Chapter 25 for further discussion of the relationship between the 3d Marine Division and the Wing over the employment of helicopters.

Prior to the reinstitution of unit integrity, there was a constant rotation of battalions among regiments. The 4th Marines in early June, for example, controlled a battalion of the 1st Marines, two battalions of the 9th Marines, and only one of its organic battalions. Under such circumstances, one of Davis' regimental commanders termed regiments "warlords" and the battalions "roving bands of mercenaries. The regiments had little interest in the logistics, personnel, supply, and maintenance fields of the battalions."⁸ Battalions, on the other hand, "felt . . . they were commanded by strangers. Every unit has kind of a personality of its own, often reflecting the personality of the commander, so you never got to know who did what best, or who would you give this mission to."⁹ Davis gradually changed that; each regiment, under normal operating circumstances, would now control its organic battalions. With the change came unit cohesion, cooperation, esprit de corps, and "a greater awareness on the part of the staff officers in the regiment and their counterparts in the battalions, about one another's capabilities and personalities."^{10***} Davis later commented that this was "the key to our success."¹¹

The most lucrative targets for the division's first mobile operation were the large enemy formations which remained to the south and west of Khe Sanh. These included remnants of the defeated *304th NVA Division* and at least two regiments of the recently infiltrated *308th NVA Division*. Elements of the two enemy divisions were concentrating their main efforts at interdicting the segment of Route 9 between Ca Lu and Khe Sanh and in constructing a new supply route from

***Colonel Stuart, who assumed command of the 3d Marines on 15 July 68, took exception to the above statements. He wrote that the regiment "had absolute tactical authority over those organizations under its Op[erational] Con[trol], and the regimental commander with any leadership ability at all knew the full status of the subordinate units. If there were any deficiencies in supply, maintenance, or personnel, he had all of the authority necessary to get those deficiencies corrected." He also took exception to terms such as "warlord" and "roving bands of mercenaries." According to Stuart, the battalions "had missions directed by the regiments in response to missions given by the division." As regimental commander, he could not worry about such niceties concerning the personality or ability of a particular battalion commander to carry out a particular mission. During this period, his selection usually depended upon whatever "battalion was the least occupied." Stuart Comments. On the other hand, Colonel Billy R. Duncan, who commanded the 2d Battalion, 1st Marines from January to August 1968, wrote that the relationships of the attached battalions to the regiments was ". . . difficult at best." He stated that the regiments had little interest in the logistics and support elements of the battalions. Col Billy R. Duncan, Comments on draft, dtd 15Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File).



Photo courtesy of Col Roger W. Peard, USMC (Ret)
The crew chief's view through the "Hell Hole" of a Marine Sikorsky CH-53 Sea Stallion is of an artillery piece dangling below the helicopter. The crew chief had the responsibility to report any swinging of the load to the pilot.

Laos across the southern portion of the Vietnamese Salient, that portion of southwestern Quang Tri Province which juts into Laos.

The primary responsibility for offensive operations within the Scotland II area of operation rested with Brigadier General Hoffman's Task Force Hotel. Working closely with representatives of the 3d Division and the 1st and 4th Marines, Hoffman and his staff prepared an operations plan which called for a series of heliborne assaults far to the south and west of Route 9. During discussions leading up to the final plan, Hoffman noted that in moving into the operational area, the Marine units involved would be placing themselves beyond the maximum range of allied artillery at Khe Sanh and Ca Lu. The solution was simple; the artillery would accompany the infantry. This was not the first time artillery would be moved to forward positions to support the maneuvering elements of the division. In



Photo from the Abel Collection
Troops from the 9th Marines unload mortar ammunition from a Marine Boeing Vertol CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter on top of a mountain fire base near the Laotian border. The fire base concept enhanced the mobility of the Marine infantry in the rugged terrain.

this case, fire support bases would have to be established in the very heart of enemy-held territory.

Since these fire support bases would be constructed in mountainous, jungle-covered terrain, almost always on an easily defensible mountain peak or razorback ridgeline, the artillery would have to be inserted and extracted by helicopter. All resupply for the fire support bases and maneuver elements would likewise have to be accomplished by air. Once established in mutually supporting pairs, 8,000 meters apart with a 3,000-meter overshoot to cover enemy mortars, these fire bases would provide continuous, overlapping artillery support to infantry units operating beneath the fan. When infantry operations moved beyond the range of the 8,000-meter artillery fan, another fire support base would be established.

Initially, the construction of these forward artillery positions would prove to be a complicated and difficult

task. Often selected from the air, the sites had to meet three specific criteria in addition to satisfying the requirement that they be at specified ranges from each other to support the scheme of maneuver. The site needed to be large enough to accommodate at least one six-gun 105mm howitzer artillery battery and it had to be defensible by an infantry platoon, or in rare cases by a reinforced platoon. To meet the third criteria, the position itself had to be capable of being constructed within 24 to 36 hours.¹² Once the Marines had selected a site that met the criteria, they accomplished the initial clearing with aerial ordnance or artillery. Engineers supported by infantry either moved overland or were helilifted to the site and would then secure the area and complete the work of demolition. A small air-transportable bulldozer would be brought in to prepare berms and pits for the artillery. Finally, helicopters would transport to the fire support base the guns, battery personnel and their supplies, and the initial stock of ammunition.

Task Force Hotel initially established two fire support bases, Robin and Loon, to support the search operations south of Route 9. As in all subsequent operations of the division that involved the use of forward artillery positions, these two fire bases were positioned so that their artillery fans overlapped.

Following five days of extensive artillery preparation, which included 30 B-52 sorties, Colonel Stanley S. Hughes' 1st Marines launched the first phase of the operation on 2 June. Early that morning, the members of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and the 2d Battalion, 4th Marines conducted heliborne assaults from their assembly areas on Hill 558 and Landing Zone Stud into Landing Zone Robin and then further south into Loon. Both landing zones, south of Route 9, were near the limit of the range of Khe Sanh-based artillery. The two battalions then swept north towards Route 9, encountering scattered but light enemy resistance.

While the 1st Marines conducted their sweep northward, four battalions under the operational control of Colonel Edward J. Miller's 4th Marines assaulted into the area and began search operations to the south and west of Robin and Loon, where they encountered stiff enemy opposition. A battalion-sized enemy ground attack on Loon coupled with heavy artillery support from guns based at Co Roc in Laos dictated that Loon be abandoned in favor of a new fire base, Torch, five kilometers to the southwest.

Despite heavy enemy resistance, not only directed against Torch, but also against the maneuvering elements, the 4th Marines destroyed sections of a newly

constructed enemy road and large quantities of equipment and supplies. With the operations' end on 18 June, the 1st and 4th Marines moved out of the area, leaving more than 650 enemy dead. Four of the six battalions committed by the *308th NVA Division* were decimated, and subsequently the division itself was dropped from the allied order of battle of enemy forces. First Lieutenant William J. Spangler, the commander of Company B, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, recalled the operation as very successful, but that the North Vietnamese "use of border sanctuaries precluded total destruction." Although the Marines patrolled up to the Laotian border and took both direct and indirect fire from NVA forces in Laos, Spangler observed, "we did not pursue them with troops or supporting arms."^{13*}

It was clear from the search operations conducted southwest of Khe Sanh that the enemy was not prepared to cope with this new form of highly mobile warfare. Artillery batteries providing a movable support fan under which the infantry could maneuver; maneuver from the high ground to the low in contrast to the older method of moving up to search the high ground. In these operations, each company of a battalion operated independently of the others in terms of mutual support. As long as they remained within the 8,000-meter artillery fan, there was no requirement that rifle companies operate together. Each company was assigned a four- to nine-kilometer-square area within which a landing zone was established to facilitate resupply and the evacuation of casualties. Patrols would then fan out from the landing zone until the company's assigned square was thoroughly searched and cleared. Once the initial square was cleared, the company was then lifted by helicopter to another area within the artillery fan and the search and clear process would begin again. This type of maneuver would continue until the entire area of operations had been given a careful and detailed search.

An alternative method developed during these operations was for a battalion to be inserted onto a heavily wooded ridgeline where an artillery fire support base would be quickly established. One company would then move out from the fire support base and seize a high knob along the ridgeline where a landing zone would be cut out of the jungle while the company's platoons searched the fingers. At the same time, a second company would pass through the first and attack along the ridgeline, seize the next hilltop,

* A detailed account of Operations Robin North and Robin South can be found in Chapter 16.

cut a landing zone, and again search down the fingers. Using this technique a battalion could search a major ridgeline thoroughly and in the process discover major enemy trail networks and supply caches. Both of these search and clear methods proved highly successful in the operations carried out southwest of Khe Sanh and would become standard for all future division operations run in the mountainous areas of Quang Tri Province.

The use of these two search methods resulted in the disclosure of the enemy's mode of logistical support. The North Vietnamese, it was discovered, relied heavily on a series of pre-positioned store sites and interconnecting trail networks to support his forces. Along a trail at intervals of about an eight-hour walk apart, Marines would find a sizeable enemy way station, composed generally of bunkers, supply caches, huts, and a hospital. Enemy porters apparently would carry supplies from large depots in Laos or North Vietnam, stopping at a way station where they would remain hidden during the day and then proceed to the next station or return for another load. In general, most enemy porters relied on guides instead of maps and used well-marked, high-speed trails. "We came to realize," noted General Davis, "that if we were able to keep Marines on these trails, even from time to time, and were able to clean out his way stations, destroy his bunkers and his supplies periodically, that we could severely limit his activity." This realization, he concluded, "was a major reason for our change in our concept of operation."¹⁴

With the end of Operations Robin North and Robin South, the 1st Marines returned to the task of providing mobile security for Khe Sanh Combat Base, the surrounding high terrain, Route 9, and supply convoys travelling the road from Landing Zone Stud to Khe Sanh. Colonel Edward J. Miller's 4th Marines, instead of returning to Camp Carroll, were helilifted to Ca Lu where a temporary regimental headquarters was established, and the regiment's battalions were assigned the task of securing vital installations along Route 9, east from Khe Sanh to Camp Carroll.

In early June the decision was made to deactivate Khe Sanh Combat Base and shift the major Marine installation in western Quang Tri eastward to Landing Zone Stud. The 3d Marine Division units were now operating well beyond the range of Khe Sanh-based artillery, and the base itself had become more of a liability than an asset since it tied down large numbers of division troops to defend it, while they might have

been better employed in mobile operations carried out on the pattern of Robin North and Robin South. Finally, the base presented a large and continuing target for North Vietnamese attacks, and was no longer considered as vital to allied defensive plans as it had under those championed by former MACV commander, General William C. Westmoreland.*

Echoing the views of General Creighton Abrams, who relieved Westmoreland in mid-June, General Cushman of III MAF, General Rosson of Prov Corps, and General Davis, the MACV press release noted:

Friendly forces must make maximum use of their superior fire power and mobility. Mobile forces, tied to no specific terrain, must be used to the utmost to attack, intercept, reinforce or take whatever action is most appropriate to meet the increased enemy threats. Therefore, we have decided to continue the mobile posture adopted in western Quang Tri Province with Operation Pegasus in April. This decision makes the operation of the base at Khe Sanh unnecessary.¹⁵

During the latter days of June as Marine engineers made steady progress in converting Landing Zone Stud into a permanent forward operating base, the 1st Marines, now under the command of Colonel Ross T. Dwyer, Jr., continued with the evacuation and destruction of Khe Sanh. The regiment also provided security for Route 9 and Fire Support Bases Shepherd and Cates, formerly known as Landing Zones Mike and Lima, respectively, and the development of Landing Zone Hawk. But the enemy, who in the past had exerted such strenuous efforts to dislodge Marine forces from the base, now appeared reluctant to let them leave. In a series of sharp engagements fought during late June and the early days of July, elements of the 1st and 4th Marines thwarted repeated enemy attempts to break the security screen around Khe Sanh and Route 9 and disrupt the orderly deactivation of the base.**

The closing of Khe Sanh marked the definite abandonment of the static defense concept against North Vietnamese Army units in western Quang Tri Province. The 3d Marine Division henceforth was committed to what General Davis termed the "mobile concept" of offensive operations. This concept, or combination of techniques, was to rely on forward artillery positions and deep vertical envelopment to carry the war to the enemy throughout the division's area of operations.

* See the discussion in Chapter 16.

** For a more detailed examination of the deactivation of Khe Sanh Combat Base, see again Chapter 16.

The Eastern DMZ

The enemy generally avoided contact with 3d Marine Division forces operating within the Lancaster II, Kentucky, and Napoleon-Saline areas of operation during the month of June. Although wide-ranging division patrols did engage small groups of enemy forces, no major engagements such as those of May took place.

Within the Napoleon-Saline area of operations, Colonel Hull's 3d Marines, with the assistance of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion and companies of the Army's 8th and 9th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division, continued to patrol the northern and southern banks and tributaries of the Song Cua Viet with the mission to ensure both the uninterrupted passage of shipping and to deny the enemy access to possible rocket sites. Patrols from the 3d Marines also continued to scour the coastal region of the province to protect the ongoing rice harvest. In addition, the regiment provided security for both equipment and personnel involved in dredging operations throughout the Cua Viet river system.

Throughout the month the 3d Marines conducted numerous daily sweeps and ambushes within its area of operations, concentrating on trail networks, river crossings, and village complexes known to harbor enemy sympathizers. Although finding and destroying a large number of enemy bunkers, spider holes, and supply caches, the Marines encountered few enemy.

While avoiding direct contact with Colonel Hull's patrols, the enemy instead relied on his DMZ-based artillery to inflict casualties on friendly forces. On 19 June and again on the 21st and 24th, Camp Kistler received a total of 111 rounds of enemy artillery resulting in 10 minor casualties and the destruction of a large ammunition bunker and gasoline storage facility. Artillery and naval gunfire counter-batteries produced several secondary explosions.

On 25 June, the 3d Marines assumed responsibility for the eastern portion of Leatherneck Square. Despite the lack of enemy contact, the heliborne assault and five-day search of the area marked the first time in a year that the regiment, its three organic battalions, and direct support artillery had operated together.

To the west, in the Kentucky area, Colonel Richard B. Smith's 9th Marines continued to conduct numerous sweeps and ambushes from static positions at Con Thien, A-3, C-2, and C-3. At the same time, Colonel Smith gradually reduced the regiment's security commitment to these four positions by shifting an ever-

increasing proportion of Marines under his command to field operations. In addition, regimental forces continued to develop a viable road network and a series of landing zones within the western portion of Leatherneck Square.

While there was a sharp decrease in enemy contact and artillery, mortar, and rocket fire compared to the previous month, the few engagements which took place were sharp and deadly. Shortly after noon on 6 June, for example, a reinforced platoon from Company E, 26th Marines observed and then engaged an estimated enemy company while on patrol 1,800 meters southeast of Con Thien. Reinforced by the command group and a rifle platoon from Company H, the patrol took the enemy under fire with small arms and 81mm mortars. The result was 14 enemy killed and 25 Marine casualties, 14 killed and 11 wounded.

The same day, the 9th Marines assumed responsibility for the Lancaster II area of operations from the 4th Marines, and a regimental command group was deployed from Dong Ha to Camp Carroll. Like the Kentucky area, the Lancaster area experienced no major enemy-initiated ground action during June, although the enemy did attempt to interdict Route 9 with ambushes and land mines and took Camp Carroll and Landing Zone Stud under rocket fire, resulting in the destruction of several ammunition and gasoline dumps and the wounding of 10 Marines.

Near the end of June, Lieutenant Colonel Michael V. Palatas' 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, in conjunction with Army Special Forces and Vietnamese regional, popular, and National Police Field forces, began a deliberate cordon in the Cua Valley, southeast of Camp Carroll. During operations around Khe Sanh earlier in the year, many native Montagnards were brought to the Cam Lo area where they were resettled temporarily with a large number of Vietnamese that had been evacuated from Leatherneck Square following Operation Hickory in 1967. In early June, it was decided to resettle the Montagnards permanently in the Cua Valley near the village of Thon Duc Kinh, four kilometers southeast of Camp Carroll. Palatas' battalion was given the task of clearing the village of known Viet Cong suspects and ensuring the area was secure enough to begin construction of the resettlement camp.

On the night of 21 June, squad-sized patrols from the battalion walked into the area, secured landing zone sites, and blocked likely enemy escape routes. At dawn the following morning, a platoon was helilifted into each landing zone, completing the cordon around Thon Duc Kinh. Later in the day, Marine and



Top photo is from the Abel Collection and bottom is Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A371563
Top, Marines of the 1st Amphibian Tractor Battalion help South Vietnamese villagers pack their worldly goods, even to the extent of placing a thatched roof on top of the vehicle, to be transported to a resettlement village. Below, Navy Corpsman HM-3 Forrest G. McDonald bandages a Montagnard child's head to prevent scalp sores from becoming infected, as the mother looks on.



Vietnamese forces conducted a house-to-house search of the village, arresting more than 100 Viet Cong suspects of whom half were detained. Once the village was secured, Marine engineers immediately began construction of the resettlement camp. Palatas' Marines remained in the area for a week, conducting medical and dental examinations of the refugees and participating in other civic action projects.¹⁶ Following the Thon Duc Kinh cordon, the 9th Marines passed control of the Lancaster II area of operations to Task Force Hotel and the regimental command group returned to Dong Ha and the battalions to patrol and security sweeps throughout Leatherneck Square and the remainder of the Kentucky area of operations.

The Pressure Continues

The enemy continued to remain reluctant to commit his forces to decisive combat in large numbers during July. Although the NVA's aversion may have been due to a planned, periodic pause to provide temporary respite for its combat units, it was clear this reluctance was in part due to the continuing and unrelenting pressure applied by 3d Marine Division forces during June. Enemy assembly and staging

areas, bases, supply caches, and trail networks were subjected to constant allied air, artillery, naval gunfire, and ground attacks, taxing his capacity to maintain frontline and support units at an effective combat strength. Despite the enemy's reluctance, there was no diminution of the 3d Marine Division effort in July.

On the first day of the month, a massive combined supporting arms attack was launched against enemy artillery and antiaircraft concentrations located in the Cap Mui Lay Sector of North Vietnam. The sector encompassed that region from the southern edge of the Demilitarized Zone, north some 14 kilometers to Cap Mui Lay, and extended from the South China Sea westward to a point approximately 25 kilometers inland.

Planning for the attack began on 24 March when General Davis' predecessor, Major General Rathvon McC. Tompkins, proposed a combined and coordinated supporting arms attack against the Cap Mui Lay Sector to destroy enemy long-range shore batteries and artillery, limit the flow of enemy supplies to the south, and relieve the artillery threat against the Dong Ha-Cua Viet area. Provisional Corps, Vietnam developed a formal plan and submitted it to III MAF,

An ammunition supply dump at Dong Ha goes up in flames after an NVA artillery bombardment.

Photo from the Abel Collection





Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A190381

The photo shows the power of the resulting explosions. The axle wheels of a truck that was parked at the dump are the only identifiable remains of the vehicle seen strewn among the wreckage.

which in turn submitted a modification to MACV for approval. Following a preliminary planning conference which included representatives from MACV, Seventh Air Force, Seventh Fleet, III MAF, and Prov Corps, General Creighton Abrams, the MACV commander, approved the plan on 21 June, with D-Day set for 1 July.

To ensure that the operation, codenamed Thor, would be a success, several preparatory steps were taken. As a deceptive measure, work continued on Dyemarker or "McNamara" Line positions at A-2, A-3, and Con Thien to cover the construction of several forward artillery positions. In addition, the large amount of artillery ammunition, heavy artillery, and supporting ships were moved into place by 30 June. The destruction of the Dong Ha ammunition dump by enemy artillery on 20 June also in an ironic way helped the deception. According to Marine staff officers, the blast at the dump "practically blew the 3d Marine Division headquarters off of the map" and left the division "desperately short" of artillery ammunition.¹⁷ The execution of a massive supporting arms attack so shortly after a huge loss of ammunition seemed out of place, especially since the bulk

of the artillery forces engaged in the attack would have to depend on the Dong Ha ammunition dump for supply.

Preceded by three days of target reconnaissance by both Marine and Air Force aircraft, the first phase of the operation began as scheduled with a massive bombing effort against the sector. Controlled by Seventh Air Force, 664 Marine, Navy, and Air Force attack aircraft and 114 B-52 sorties delivered more than 4,000 tons of ordnance against predetermined enemy targets during the first two days of the operation. In phases two and three, the artillery fire of 13 batteries, composed of 59 guns, was integrated with the naval gunfire support of two cruisers and six destroyers and the continuing air attacks against target lists which were continually updated by 1st Marine Aircraft Wing reconnaissance flights.

On the morning of 8 July, the artillery batteries involved in Operation Thor began withdrawing from their forward positions and by the 10th had returned to their normal support locations.¹⁸ Also on the 8th, control of the area reverted from Prov Corps, which since 1 July was under Army Lieu-

tenant General Richard G. Stilwell,* to the Seventh Air Force which would coordinate future surveillance and air attacks on reemerging targets.

Damage to the North Vietnamese combat capability in the Cap Mui Lay Sector as a result of Operation Thor was substantial: more than 500 artillery and anti-aircraft positions, numerous bunkers and storage areas, and at least two surface-to-air missile sites were destroyed. Also, allied observers detected 352 secondary explosions and 236 secondary fires, providing evidence of probable hits on ammunition and supply dumps. The operation, however, was to have a more lasting effect. Artillery fire from north of the Demilitarized Zone declined significantly following Thor, as did the frequency of anti-aircraft opposition experienced by reconnaissance aircraft at all altitudes.**

While Operation Thor was in progress, the 3d and 9th Marines, in coordination with the 2d ARVN Regiment, launched attacks against enemy troops driven south of the Demilitarized Zone by the massive air and artillery bombardment. On 2 July, Colonel Hull's 3d Marines, composed initially of the 1st and 2d Battalions, began moving from the Cua Viet into an area north of A-1, centered on Jones Creek, a tributary of both the Song Cua Viet and Song Ben Hai. Lieutenant

Colonel Charles V. Jarman's 1st Battalion, the first unit to move out, swept north along the west bank of the tributary, while providing security for the ARVN engineer effort on the Lai An road. To the east, the 2d Battalion, under Lieutenant Colonel Jack W. Davis, swept north toward the village of Nui Trung.

As Jarman's Marines moved northward toward the abandoned and destroyed village of Lai An on the 4th, Captain Gary D. Dockendorff's Company C came under mortar and small arms fire from an estimated enemy platoon in the village ruins.¹⁹ The remainder of the battalion immediately maneuvered to exploit the contact, preventing the enemy from withdrawing. Pressing the attack, Jarman's Marines, covered by air, artillery, naval gunfire, and the direct fire of 90mm tank guns on the flanks, advanced from position to position. "If it gets too tough," Lieutenant Colonel Jarman told one of his company commanders, "pull back and we'll pound them some more. Then we'll see how tough they are."²⁰ By the 6th, the battalion secured Lai An and reported 134 North Vietnamese dead among its ruins.

The following day, after endeavoring to regain contact with the retreating NVA, a battalion patrol encountered an enemy company occupying positions around Tai Nu, one kilometer northeast of Lai An. The NVA company, armed with an 85mm light field gun, mortars, and automatic weapons, was first taken under artillery fire and then overrun by a coordinated tank and infantry assault.²¹ In the Tai Nu action, the Marine

U.S. Army LtGen Richard G. Stilwell, left, the new CG, Prov Corps, talks with South Vietnamese BGen Ngo Quang Truong, CG, 1st ARVNDiv. Although under III MAF, Prov Corps had operational control of the two Army divisions and the 3d Marine Division in northern I Corps.

Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Center of Military History

*On 1 July, Army Lieutenant General William B. Rosson, the former Prov Corps commander, became Acting CG III MAF while General Cushman, the III MAF commander took a month leave in the United States. Major General Richard G. Stilwell, who had served a short tour as Deputy Commanding General, III MAF, Army, on 1 July assumed command of Provisional Corps, Vietnam. That same day, in a brief ceremony held at Phu Bai, he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant General by Secretary of the Army Stanley R. Resor. Fifteen days later, Headquarters, XXIV Corps was activated and the personnel and equipment of Provisional Corps, Vietnam, were absorbed by the newly activated Army corps. Operational Report, Headquarters, XXIV Corps for Period Ending 31 October 1968, 15Nov68, p. 1. In contrast to Rosson, who enjoyed excellent relations with the Marine command, Stilwell's relations were somewhat more tenuous. Marine Brigadier General Earl E. Anderson, Cushman's Chief of Staff, wrote in May 1968 that Stilwell was rather "unpopular" at III MAF headquarters and predicted that when he assumed command of Prov Corps, "he's going to be a hard one to deal with after he gets his three stars." A few months later Anderson wrote that Stilwell was often "by-passing General Cushman and going directly to ComUSMACV. The boss has spoken to him about this on one or two occasions . . ." BGen E. E. Anderson ltr to MajGen Murray, dtd 17May68, and ltr to MajGen McCutcheon, dtd 9Sep68, Encls, Gen Earl E. Anderson, Comments on draft, dtd 18Dec94 (Vietnam Comment File). More diplomatically, General Cushman stated that Stilwell "could be abrasive . . .", but that "he was a fine combat man." Gen Robert E. Cushman, Jr., intvw, 1Nov 1982, (Oral HistColl, MCHC, Washington, D.C.), pp. 34-35.

**For a detailed account of the artillery's role in Operation Thor, see Chapter 26.



battalion reported another 42 NVA killed and 23 weapons captured, including two 82mm mortars.

Advancing on the right flank, Lieutenant Colonel Davis' 2d Battalion had swept through Nhi Trung and approached a rice paddy area, one kilometer south of the abandoned village of An My. At that point, North Vietnamese automatic weapons and rocket propelled grenades opened up on the Marines. Maneuvering around the ARVN position at A-1, the battalion, with naval gunfire support, took the enemy position. Searching the area, the Marines found over 20 NVA dead. Battalion losses were placed at three killed and two wounded, all a result of sniper fire. Lieutenant Colonel James W. Marsh's 3d Battalion, 3d Marines, which had been held in reserve, moved north on the 7th and seized the area around the destroyed village of Giem Ha Trung without incident. Captain Matthew G. McTiernan, the commanding officer of Company I of the 3d Battalion, remembered that his company's specific mission in Operation Thor "was to seize and

then search a small abandoned fishing village on the coast just below the Ben Hai River." In the attack on the hamlet, he had a Navy cruiser in direct support. According to McTiernan, he had the guns of the ship "under my exclusive direction for about three to four hours." He described the effect on the troops as "truly electric" as he used the "8-inchers directly on the village" prior to the assault and then "shifted their fire to the high ground across the Ben Hai during our assault and search." His troops found no bunkers and obtained "no body counts," but the action "had a far more intangible, positive and lasting effect on the company's combat capability."²²

The 1st and 2d Battalions, 3d Marines, began withdrawing southward on the 8th, followed by the 3d Battalion on the 9th. On the evening of the 9th, as Lieutenant Colonel Davis' battalion, the last of the regiment's battalions to displace to Quang Tri to undergo rehabilitation, the 3d Marines ended their participation in Operation Napoleon-Saline and

Marines of Company F, 2d Battalion, 3d Marines throw grenades at suspected enemy positions in the coastal sector near the DMZ. They are taking part in the infantry portion of Operation Thor to counter any NVA forces moving south to escape the air, naval gunfire, and artillery bombardment of NVA positions north of the DMZ.

Department of Defense (USMC) A191900



passed responsibility for the area of operations to the 1st Marines. The following day, the 3d Marines assumed responsibility for the Lancaster II area of operations and the regimental headquarters was deployed to Camp Carroll.

Throughout the Napoleon-Saline area of operations during the remainder of the month, Colonel Dwyer's 1st Marines continued search and sweep operations on both the northern and southern banks of the Song Cua Viet to insure the uninterrupted passage of allied shipping and to deny the enemy access to rocket positions oriented towards Dong Ha, Quang Tri, and Cua Viet. In addition, Dwyer's Marines coordinated the defense of outposts at C-4 and Oceanview, both within a kilometer of the southern boundary of the DMZ.

While contact with elements of the *138th NVA Regiment*, known to be operating in the area, was negligible, contact with the *V-51* and *C-59 Local Force* Viet Cong units was light and widespread. One of the heaviest engagements took place on the 22d when Company H, 1st Marines, while occupying a patrol base south of the Cua Viet, 10 kilometers east of Dong Ha, spotted an armed enemy platoon dressed in black pajamas, moving along the coastal sand dune east of the village of Thon My Loc. The Viet Cong platoon was taken under fire with small arms, artillery, and 81mm mortars. A sweep of the area by the Marine company revealed numerous spider holes, punji traps, a bamboo house with hot food for approximately 30 people, and 10 Viet Cong bodies.²³

The second of the two ground operations to exploit the results of Operation Thor began on 7 July when the 9th Marines began a west to east sweep of the area between Con Thien and the DMZ in the Kentucky area of operations. Unlike the violent action experienced by the 3d Marines in the Napoleon-Saline area, the 9th Marines attack met little enemy resistance. If enemy forces had been driven south of the Song Ben Hai into the Kentucky area by the massive artillery and air attack, they quickly had returned to their sanctuaries in the north. High temperatures and equally high humidity, however, posed a major hazard, and everything possible was done to ensure an adequate water supply. Heavy U.S. Army ammunition trailers hooked up to ARVN armored personnel carriers were filled with water cans, greatly reducing the need for continual helicopter water resupply.²⁴ Despite the precautions, Smith's regiment suffered numerous heat casualties.

The most significant contact during the regiment's drive northward occurred on 11 July, four

kilometers northeast of Con Thien, when elements of Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. LaMontagne's 3d Battalion discovered a reinforced NVA platoon in the open. Fixing the enemy platoon in place with small arms fire, LaMontagne's Marines, with air, artillery, and tank support, launched a coordinated air-ground attack through the area killing more than 30 enemy troops and seizing 26 weapons.

Elsewhere in the area, attacking units of the 9th Marines uncovered and destroyed numerous enemy fortifications, many of which contained ammunition and equipment. A few of the positions were lightly defended, but the majority were abandoned. One bunker system discovered by LaMontagne's Marines, 4,000 meters due north of Con Thien, spanned more than one kilometer. In addition to 242 well-constructed bunkers, the complex contained a large mess hall with hot food still on the tables. Supplies and equipment abandoned by the enemy in his flight included weapons, 935 mortar rounds, 500 pounds of explosives, 55 antitank mines, and 500 pounds of rice. LaMontagne's Marines also found 29 NVA bodies, killed by artillery and airstrikes during the advance on the complex.

After 10 months as commanding officer of the 9th Marines, Colonel Richard B. Smith was relieved on 13 July by Colonel Robert H. Barrow. A veteran of China service during World War II and the Chosin Reservoir campaign in Korea, Colonel Barrow was assigned to the division at the request of General Davis. Three days later, the regiment displaced to Landing Zone Stud in preparation for future operations under Task Force Hotel in the Lancaster II area of operations. With the move to Stud, the regiment's battalions were brought together for the first time since May 1967, "to the enthusiasm and jubilation of all hands."²⁵

As the 9th Marines departed, Colonel Dwyer's 1st Marines assumed tactical responsibility for the Kentucky area. The regiment also had operational control of newly created Task Force Mike, consisting of a command group from the 3d Tank Battalion and a company of 3d Reconnaissance Battalion Marines, and Lieutenant Colonel Francis J. Heath's 2d Battalion, 26th Marines. During the remaining days of July, Dwyer's Marines concentrated on aggressive day and night ambushes, patrols, searches, and minesweeping operations, while concurrently securing fixed installations throughout the area of operations. Although enemy contact was very light, the 1st Marines did take a number of casualties from mines and surprise firing devices.

On 23 July, Lieutenant Colonel Heath's battalion began assuming operational control of the rifle companies of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines as they were phased into the battalion's positions in preparation for a relief in lines. Company E, 26th Marines, relieved by Company G, 1st Marines, proceeded to Quang Tri Combat Base on the 24th and assumed positions along the base's defensive perimeter. Following a brief, unproductive, one-day sweep northward from Con Thien along the Kinh Mon Trail to the DMZ and southward from A-3 through Leatherneck Square, the remaining elements of Heath's battalion departed the Kentucky area of operations. On 28 July, they proceeded to Quang Tri Combat Base to prepare and train for service afloat with Seventh Fleet's Special Landing Force. The battalion, by 8 August, had embarked on board ships of Amphibious Ready Group Alpha, and the battalion, on the 13th, once operational control had been passed to the 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade, was redesignated Battalion Landing Team (BLT) 2/26.²⁶

Into the Western Mountains

During June, 3d Reconnaissance Battalion patrols reported increased enemy activity north of Thon Son Lam, an area that had seen little enemy activity for the previous several months. It appeared that the enemy, estimated to be of battalion strength, possibly an element of the *64th Regiment, 320th NVA Division*, was moving through the large valley to the north of the Dong Ha-Dong Ma Mountain ridgeline into the region around Thon Son Lam.²⁷

The vital allied area straddled not only Route 9, the major east-west line of communication in Quang Tri Province, but also included two major III MAF artillery positions, Camp Carroll and Thon Son Lam. Although these fire support complexes presented the enemy with inviting targets, the successful destruction of which would provide both a tactical as well as a propaganda victory, the enemy had yet to mount a strong attack upon either position. Instead, his forces had concentrated on periodically interdicting Route 9 and harassing the installations with artillery, rocket, and mortar attacks. With the Demilitarized Zone and North Vietnam less than 20 kilometers distant, the enemy threat to the area remained constant.

In mid-June, upon receipt of a warning order from General Davis, Task Force Hotel began planning an operation in the area north and northwest of Camp Carroll over which the enemy had long enjoyed con-

trol. General Davis informed Task Force Hotel, however, that the necessary forces, two Marine infantry regiments, the 3d and 9th Marines, and elements of the 2d ARVN regiment, and accompanying resources, would not be available until mid-July. On 5 July, General Davis approved the concept for the proposed operation, which "for want of a better name, we dubbed . . . 'July Action.'"²⁸

The approved scheme of maneuver was one of area saturation. Davis simultaneously placed the forces involved at various locations throughout the region—including three battalions near the DMZ—in order to "upset the enemy quickly and decisively."²⁹ The 9th Marines' zone of action would include a wide swath of piedmont from the DMZ to Route 9, west of Con Thien, while the zone assigned the 3d Marines embraced the rugged National Forest Reserve, which included Dong Ha Mountain and Mutter Ridge, a high ridgeline which generally parallels the southern boundary of the DMZ. The zone assigned the 2d ARVN Regiment lay west and northwest of the Rockpile and consisted of a maze of valleys and sheer ridgelines.

General Davis directed that the operation begin on 16 July, following a series of B-52 Arclight strikes throughout the area. However, on the 15th, MACV canceled the proposed Arclight strikes for the lack of sufficient intelligence justification.* Later in the day, Lieutenant General Stilwell, the Prov Corps commander, suggested that if the operation were postponed 24 hours, the strikes would be carried out. The promised B-52 strikes never occurred and, instead, Marine tactical air and artillery strikes carried out the preparation of the area. While air and artillery strikes were effective, General Davis noted that they "lacked the mass destructive effect and shock power of the Arclights." According to Davis, "intelligence reports indicated that the enemy was surprised and confused by the operation but due to the protection afforded by bunkers from our fires, he was not disorganized to the point where he lost his capacity to resist."³⁰

*The selection process for Arclight targets required the submission of only current, hard intelligence restricted to the proposed target nomination. The division's request for Arclights included not only specific target intelligence, but an immediate area intelligence summary. Prov Corps forwarded the request without the area intelligence summary to MACV where it was reviewed and subsequently rejected on the basis of insufficient specific target intelligence in comparison with other proposed targets. CG3dMarDiv msg to CGProvCorpsV, dtd 20Jul68, in III MAF Message File.

Shortly after dawn on the 17th, the 2d and 3d Battalions, 9th Marines assaulted two landing zones in what was commonly called Helicopter Valley, three kilometers south of the DMZ. At the same time, the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines walked from the vicinity of C-2 into blocking positions south of the 2d Battalion in the area of operations most eastern sector. To the west, the 2d Battalion, 3d Marines assaulted into a landing zone at the upper end of Helicopter Valley, while the 1st and 3d Battalions, 2d ARVN Regiment moved overland into blocking positions west of the Song Cam Lo valley. The remaining battalions, the 1st and 3d, of the 3d Marines, since 15 July under Lieutenant Colonel Vaughn R. Stuart, would join the operation on the 18th and 19th, respectively, with a heliborne assault into landing zones just north of Dong Ha Mountain.

As Captain Jack D. Schaeffer's Company K, 9th Marines moved from Landing Zone Sparrow north toward Mutter Ridge, it was engaged by an estimated reinforced NVA squad deployed in an extensive, well-fortified bunker system. Schaeffer's Marines immediately returned fire and moved back a sufficient distance to employ artillery and air. While four Marine A-4 Skyhawks and two F-4 Phantoms flew close support missions directed at destroying enemy automatic weapons and mortar emplacements, it became evident that the NVA unit was at least of company size. As the battalion's other forward companies moved into position for a flanking assault, Schaeffer's Marines carried the enemy complex late in the afternoon. The Marines lost 9 killed and 29 wounded while counting 38 NVA dead.

During the course of the operation, elements of Lieutenant Colonel Frederic S. Knight's 2d Battalion, 9th Marines maneuvered northward to secure the high ground in preparation for the final attack.* Moving to within one kilometer of the DMZ on the afternoon of 21 July, the battalion came under a heavy 82mm mortar attack, which caused the death of one Marine and the wounding of nine others. Within an hour of the mortar attack, First Lieutenant Arthur A. Pierce's Company F observed approximately 35 NVA, carrying two mortars, moving west on a trail paralleling the southern bound-

ary of the DMZ. The company took the enemy force under fire with mortars and artillery, and then moved to close with the NVA unit. Preceded by eight fixed-wing sorties, one of which scored a direct hit on an active 82mm mortar position, Pierce's Marines reached the trail and found over 20 NVA dead. A subsequent search of the area revealed 10 weapons, 59 packs, 41 gas masks, and a large variety of equipment, all of which were new, indicating that the enemy unit recently had infiltrated from the north or had been resupplied.

Lieutenant Pierce's company contact on the 21st prompted Colonel Barrow to request permission to enter the southern half of the DMZ if the tactical situation so dictated. The request went forward rapidly through the chain of command to MACV, which denied it to the surprise of Colonel Barrow.³¹ As he later commented:

... it ... still has not been sufficiently explained to me why at any time we seemingly arbitrarily give the enemy our half of the DMZ, particularly when we know he uses it not only as a sanctuary, but as an area from which he can launch mortar attacks against our forces.³²

Without the permission to enter the southern half of the DMZ, the regiment swung its attack to the south, "the direction which he [the enemy] was primarily oriented anyway."³³

Although the sweep south through jungle-covered hills and valleys produced little contact, the 9th Marines did discover a number of large elaborate base areas, which the enemy had been able to construct and maintain during more than a year without allied interference. One fortification, located by Lieutenant Colonel Knight's battalion, six kilometers southwest of Con Thien, was unique. Composed of 60 A-frame timbered bunkers built into the sides of bomb craters, each with an average overhead cover 10-feet-thick, the system was connected to a large command bunker by a network of interconnecting tunnels. The command bunker, capable of accommodating up to 40 personnel, featured an aperture overlooking Con Thien and C-2. Documents found in the bunker indicated that the NVA had been plotting, tallying, and reporting the traffic patterns of helicopters, tanks, and trucks entering and leaving those two positions.

In addition to fortifications, the attacking forces also uncovered tons of enemy ordnance, ranging from 122mm rockets to small arms ammunition and explosives. On the 19th, Captain Matthew G. McTiernan's Company I, 3d Marines unearthed the most significant

*Colonel Knight remembered that General Davis had "dropped in" at his headquarters and told him "Fred . . . I have decided to make you my swing battalion." Knight asked what a swing battalion was and received the answer "Whenever anyone finds the enemy, I'm going to drop you right on top of them." Col Frederic S. Knight, Comments on draft, dtd 10Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).



Photo from the Abel Collection

Capt David N. Buckner, right, and 1stLt Kenneth Tolpingrud of the 2d Battalion, 9th Marines examine two captured NVA 12.7mm antiaircraft guns near the DMZ.

weapons cache on the northeast slope of Dong Ha Mountain. Dug into the side of the mountain were six large bunkers, which, upon closer inspection were found to have false floors. Beneath the flooring, McTiernan's Marines discovered two complete 75mm pack howitzers and 26 rounds of howitzer ammunition. The howitzers were believed to be the ones that had harassed Camp Carroll sporadically during the preceding months.*

A second phase of the operation followed quickly on the heels of the first. One enemy infiltration corridor within the area of operation had not been touched by the 9th Marines, 3d Marines, or the 2d ARVN Regiment: it was the upper Song Cam Lo basin. On 27 July, the 1st and 3d Battalions, 3d Marines simultaneously assaulted three landing zones, Joan, Margo, and Becky,

which subsequently were developed into fire support bases for future operations.** In addition, a permanent observation post was established on Dong Ha Mountain. During the two-battalion sweep of the river basin, "the enemy chose to avoid contact," observed Brigadier General Carl Hoffman, the Task Force Hotel commander, "and therefore we can't point at any statistics to prove the worth of this particular effort." Hoffman noted, however that "in penetrating this corridor we demonstrated our capacity to do this and we also opened another half dozen landing zones."³⁴

Colonel Barrow's 9th Marines was phased out of the operation on the 31st, followed on 3 August by the 3d Marines, now under Colonel Richard L.

*Captain McTiernan remembered that they assembled one of the pack howitzers in the enemy bunker and that "you could fire and hit Camp Carroll by simply using line of sight to elevate and traverse the gun." McTiernan Comments. Colonel Stuart recalled that the Marine Corps Commandant, General Leonard F. Chapman, directed that the 75mm pack howitzers be sent to the Marine Barracks in Washington, D.C. Stuart Comments.

**Colonel Vaughn R. Stuart, the 3d Marines commander at the time, stated that according to Marine Corps intelligence this was a major NVA infiltration route into Vietnam from Laos. Stuart remembered that General Davis told him "that if we made a sizeable contact, he would give me as many battalions as I needed . . . [and] that I was free to cross the Laotian border, provided the contact we made was sizeable. He attached one proviso to this verbal directive . . . I was to call before my first troops crossed. . . . he would not stop me from going, but he wanted to know just before I commenced to cross." Stuart Comments.



Top photo is from the Abel Collection and bottom photo is courtesy of Col Vaughn R. Stuart, USMC (Ret).
Top, members of the 9th Marines stack boxes of captured enemy mortar and artillery rounds found in an NVA base area. Below, members of a U.S. Army artillery battery at Camp Carroll pose with one of the two 75mm pack howitzers captured by Company I, 3d Battalion, 3d Marines.



Michael, Jr., who had assumed command two days earlier. The operation was considered a success not only in terms of enemy troops and equipment destroyed, but also in providing the units involved with additional experience in the conduct of highly mobile mountain warfare. The operation, as the task force commander later wrote, "taught us that, with effort and energy properly focused on a selected location, we can prepare LZs, build FSB's, virtually anywhere. The tougher the terrain, the more vital the systematic application of resources. But we reject the notion that there are areas too difficult to conquer." Operation July Action, he continued, "also reminded the enemy that he has no safe havens. . . . Most important, perhaps, our pioneering greatly facilitates our return whenever we choose."³⁵

While the planning for operations in the Dong Ha Mountain and Mutter Ridge complex took place, Task Force Hotel looked longingly at the rugged terrain west of Landing Zone Stud in the Scotland II area of operations. The area was known to contain the base area of the *8th Battalion, 29th NVA Regiment* and was a source of a variety of nasty enemy activities. Allied fixed-wing planes and helicopters that wandered over the region often received antiaircraft fire which resulted in a number of lost aircraft. Supply convoys traveling Route 9 to Landing Zone Stud faced a constant threat of ambush as they turned south at the Rockpile. Also, with the closing of Khe Sanh and the movement of Task Force Hotel to Landing Zone Stud, the new combat base was increasingly a target for enemy rocket gunners.

General Hoffman's task force originally planned to employ a battalion of the 1st Marines, upon its departure from Khe Sanh, to land on Dong Ca Lu or Hill 715—the area's dominant feature—and search the surrounding terrain, six kilometers west of Landing Zone Stud or Vandegrift as it was to be renamed. Colonel Dwyer nominated the 1st Battalion, but by 6 July, when the 1st Marines departed Khe Sanh, the 1st Battalion remained behind to battle an enemy force on Hill 689. The battalion spent another six days in battle before it could retrieve eight Marine bodies from the forward slope of the hill.

On 9 July, the 1st Battalion, 3d Marines arrived at Landing Zone Stud and relieved the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines temporarily as the combat base's security force. The following day, Landing Zone Stud took several volleys of enemy 122mm rockets. On the 11th, Task Force Hotel assumed direct operational control of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, as no other battalion was

available, and the battalion was transported by helicopter to Hill 715.*

The first wave of Lieutenant Colonel Thomas H. Galbraith's Marines scrambled from their CH-46s, and like the two waves that followed, encountered no enemy opposition. But a helicopter in the fourth wave, while hovering a few feet above the landing zone, took several bursts of .50-caliber machine gun fire and crashed in a ball of flames. Miraculously, the CH-46's full load of troops made it to safety, and only one of the air crewman sustained injury.

Braving constant mortar and sniper fire as they swept the area, Galbraith's Marines found numerous heavily fortified enemy positions that recently had been occupied. On the 13th, as Company B moved westward down a trail, the company's point element was struck by a command detonated mine. The company immediately pulled back, set up a perimeter, and sent a squad forward to retrieve the body of one Marine and to look for another. As the squad inched forward, the enemy detonated another mine and raked the company's position with .50-caliber, mortar, and grenade fire. The following day, Company A assisted with the recovery of casualties, but it too encountered command detonated mines, resulting in four additional killed, including the company's commanding officer, Captain Henry D. Banks.** The company withdrew, and on the 15th, Galbraith's battalion was flown to Landing Zone Stud to relieve forces slated to participate in Operation July Action.³⁶

During the next 10 ten days, Colonel Edward J. Miller's 4th Marines conducted mobile defense operations to the west of Fire Support Bases Shepherd and Cates with little enemy contact. In addition, elements of the regiment secured Ca Lu, Landing Zone Stud, and Route 9 from Ca Lu north. As the division's reserve regiment, it could, if ordered, provide forces for operations anywhere within the division's area of operations.

On 25 July, Lieutenant Colonel Galbraith's battalion was ordered back to Hill 715, not only to expand

* Elements of the 4th Marines were committed to assisting the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines with the fighting on Hill 689 and securing Fire Support Bases Shepherd and Cates.

** This was the same Captain Banks, who had commanded Company A, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, and had been seriously wounded in that company's engagement on Hill 689 near Khe Sanh on 16 April. See Chapter 16. Colonel Galbraith wrote that when he assumed command of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, Captain Banks was the battalion assistant S-3 and that the Company A commander had just been transferred: "Hank asked for the company, and I gave it to him. His death has always weighed heavily on me." Col Thomas H. Galbraith, Comments on draft, n.d. [Dec68] (Vietnam Comment File).

its previous search, but also to recover the bodies of the two Marines killed on 13 July. BLT 2/4, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Louis A. Rann, simultaneously massed on Hill 679, 12 kilometers west of Stud, and began search operations to the north.

Split into two command groups of two companies each, Galbraith's battalion advanced toward Hill 715 from the south and east, under heavy enemy small arms, rocket-propelled grenade, and mortar fire. The Marines found the hill, once secured, to be heavily mined and boobytrapped. While seating an 81mm mortar baseplate, for example, Company B Marines detonated a booby-trapped antitank mine which killed one and wounded four. Continuing the search, Galbraith's Marines recovered the bodies of the two missing Marines, and at the same time discovered sizable caches of weapons, ammunition, and rice scattered throughout the hill complex, but encountered no enemy forces. While destroying the captured weapons and ammunition, the battalion prepared to

evacuate the rice for distribution to refugees in the province. On 4 August, after the completion of the search mission, Marine helicopters lifted the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines out of the area and returned the unit to Landing Zone Stud.

By the morning of 29 July, Lieutenant Colonel Rann's Marines had reached Hill 606, four kilometers north of Hill 679. Shortly before noon, Marines from Company G observed and took under fire 15 enemy troops. Later a platoon moved forward to check the area and encountered a well-concealed and well-entrenched enemy force. Four Marines were killed and nine wounded by the enemy's initial heavy burst of claymores and small arms and grenade fire. The bodies of three of the four Marines killed remained unrecovered as artillery and air pounded the bunker complex throughout the remainder of the day. The following morning, after an additional artillery mission, Company G moved forward and recovered the bodies without incident.

Landing Zone Stud has now become Vandegrift Combat Base, complete with a makeshift radio tower to control helicopter traffic. LCpl John L. Phillips, in the tower, is bringing in for a landing a resupply Boeing CH-46 Sea Knight aircraft

Photo is from the Abel Collection
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On 3 August, after establishing a temporary fire support base, named Shoup, on Hill 606, Rann's battalion received the additional mission of searching the northern slope of the Khe Giang Thoan Valley, three kilometers to the northeast. The area was believed to harbor the launching sites of rockets that had harassed Thon Son Lam and the Rockpile for several months. As Company F moved down Hill 606 toward the valley the following day, it discovered seven abandoned huts. Below each, Marines found caches of arms, ammunition, and equipment, the total of which they estimated at 20 tons.³⁷

The search of the Khe Giang Thoan Valley during the next two days produced no additional weapons caches and few rocket launch sites. However, the companies involved were probed continually once they had moved into night defensive positions. In one instance, Company E Marines heard movement along their perimeter throughout the night, and awoke the following morning to find their claymores turned inward toward the company's lines. In another, Company G's lines were probed by an estimated force of 10 NVA under cover of small arms and grenade fire. The company sustained four killed and six wounded in the attack. On 6 August, Rann's battalion ended its search of the valley and was helilifted to Landing Zone Stud, now officially designated Vandegrift Combat Base.

The 3d Marine Division, during the months of June and July, slowly and methodically shifted from the defensive posture of the past to a more flexible mobile offensive posture which would characterize future division operations. It established large numbers of fire support bases and landing zones in areas that the enemy once considered havens and untouchable by allied forces. In addition, these months witnessed the reorientation of division forces from the coastal lowlands to the mountainous region of western Quang Tri Province. The remaining months of 1968 would see this move accelerated.

Southern Quang Tri and Thua Thien

While Marine operations were conducted in central and western Quang Tri Province, responsibility for the coastal lowlands, piedmont, and jungle-covered mountains south of Dong Ha and north of Hue was shared by the 3d ARVN Regiment and the U.S. Army's 1st Cavalry Division. The ARVN Regiment operated mainly in jungle canopy of enemy *Base Area 114*, southwest of Quang Tri City, while the 1st Cavalry Division's three brigades, under the command of Major

General John J. Tolson III, USA, secured the coast and piedmont from Quang Tri City south to Camp Evans. It also conducted search and clear operations in enemy *Base Areas 114* and *101*.^{38*}

During June and July, the division continued its participation in Operation Jeb Stuart III, accomplishing the two-fold mission of rice denial and offensive operations in the two enemy base areas within the division's area of operations. In the coastal plains, it conducted rice denial operations in conjunction with elements of the 1st and 3d ARVN Regiments to ensure that rice from the spring harvest was withheld from the enemy. In *Base Area 101*, west of Quang Tri City, the division's 1st Brigade initiated combat operations in search of enemy forces. At the same time, in *Base Area 114*, elements of the division's 3d Brigade and a battalion of the 3d ARVN Regiment conducted operations over rugged terrain in search of not only enemy forces, but also known headquarters and support installations.

During the middle of June, advancing elements of the 3d ARVN Regiment encountered heavy enemy resistance in the southeastern portion of *Base Area 114* as elements of the *803d NVA Regiment* defended a large cache area. The battle for the area continued with sporadic, but heavy contact through the 21st. This action resulted not only in the demolition of the enemy cache area and the capture of large quantities of ammunition, but also in the destruction of the enemy regiment's antiaircraft company and the seizure of the regiment's headquarters complex. South of the base area, elements of the cavalry division's 2d Brigade entered what appeared to be the enemy's *Tri-Thien Military Region* headquarters bunker and tunnel complex, occupied during the attack on Hue. While searching the complex, the Army troopers captured numerous maps and documents relating to the enemy's activities from the DMZ south to Da Nang. Among the maps was one which detailed the construction of a supply road from the A Shau Valley east into *Base Area 114*. Reaction to this information resulted in the destruction of several enemy trucks, construction sites, and a large portion of the road.

While elements of the ARVN regiment and the division's 2d Brigade battled the enemy's *803d Regiment* in the mountains, two other enemy regiments were on the move in the coastal lowlands, centered in the Trieu Phong area, northeast of Quang Tri City. On

* Major General Tolson was replaced on 15 July as division commander by Brigadier General Richard L. Irby.

26 June, elements of the 1st ARVN Regiment made heavy contact with the *4th Battalion, 812th NVA Regiment*, and claimed killing 128 enemy troops. The following day, in a two-day battle, elements of the Air Cavalry's 5th Armored trapped the *814th NVA Battalion* in the coastal village of Binh An, 14 kilometers northeast of Quang Tri, and reported more than 230 enemy soldiers dead and 44 prisoners taken.

At the conclusion of the spring rice harvest, the 1st Cavalry Division shifted tactical emphasis to an even more intensified campaign against the two enemy base areas. Elements of all three brigades air assaulted deep into the base areas, established new landing zones and constructed fire support bases capable of interdicting the enemy's communication routes through the A Shau Valley. Although numerous NVA complexes, arms caches, and training areas were discovered and destroyed, the enemy increasingly employed anti-aircraft fire against troop-laden helicopters to limit the mobility and flexibility of the division's ground forces operating in the jungle-covered base areas. By the end of July, the 1st Air Cavalry Division had driven several combat and support elements of the enemy's *7th Front* further west, possibly into the northern A Shau Valley, the site of a major logistical storage area.*

In central Thua Thien Province to the south, the 101st Airborne Division, under the command of Major General Olinto M. Barsanti, continued to conduct the follow-on, division-level operation, Nevada Eagle, which began in mid-May with the termination of Operation Delaware.** During June and July, the division coordinated rice denial operations in Thua Thien Province and conducted offensive operations to defeat North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces and destroy the enemy's base areas and lines of communication. The division's 1st Brigade conducted reconnaissance in force operations along Route 547, which parallels the Song Bo, west of Hue; the 2d Brigade continued reconnaissance in force operations in the coastal plains north and east of Hue and provided security and support for the rice collection effort; and the 3d Brigade, 82d Air-

borne Division, to a limited extent, secured major fire support bases astride Route 547 and conducted search and clear operations along major enemy entry and exit routes to the coastal plains.***

The division's combat operations during the summer months were characterized by infrequent enemy contact, increased boobytrap incidents, and the capture of rice caches. With the defeat of multi-battalion NVA attempts to seize and hold areas of the coastal plains in May and their retreat into mountain base camps, a tactical void was created that eventually was filled by local guerrillas and the Viet Cong infrastructure. Despite extensive reconnaissance in force operations and numerous saturation patrols and ambushes, the enemy, which had broken down into squad-sized or smaller units, chose not to engage the division's maneuver elements. When he was engaged, the contacts were of short duration and involved few casualties on both sides.

As guerrilla activity increased, so did division casualties from surprise firing devices. Of the 40 airborne troopers killed and 375 wounded during June and July, Viet Cong-emplaced boobytraps, generally hand grenades or 105mm artillery rounds with trip wire devices attached, accounted for 18 killed and 173 wounded. Despite increased friendly and few enemy casualties, the division's vigorous program of patrols and ambushes did result in the discovery and capture of numerous rice caches. Working closely with South Vietnamese Regional, Popular, and National Police Field Forces, the division's rice denial campaign resulted in the capture of more than 345 tons of rice and in impeding enemy movement through the area of operations.

During the last week of July, the division began preparations for a return to the A Shau Valley, with a logistical build-up and the construction of fire support bases. The plan called for one brigade of the division and elements of the 1st ARVN Regiment to conduct a combined helicopter and ground assault into the valley,

*On 27 June, the Department of the Army directed that the 1st Cavalry Division be redesignated the 1st Air Cavalry Division and the 101st Airborne Division redesignated the 101st Air Cavalry Division. However, the terminology was withdrawn on 26 August and the new designations established were 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) and 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile), to preserve the "heritage and traditions and to enhance further long established *esprit* associated with these famous divisions." MACV ComdHist, 1968, p. 245.

**Major General Melvin Zais assumed command of the division from Major General Barsanti on 19 July 1968.

***The 3d Brigade, undergoing a reorganization from its deployment task force organization to that of a light infantry brigade, was experiencing extreme personnel turbulence. The upheaval was caused not only by the reorganization, but also by a decision by the Department of the Army to give each individual who had deployed with the brigade in February the option of returning to Fort Bragg or remaining in Vietnam with the unit. Of the 3,650 personnel who deployed from Fort Bragg, 2,513 chose to return. The training of more than 2,900 replacements therefore limited combat operations. By the end of July, the brigade was declared combat ready and began full-time operations in its assigned area.

along Route 547A. The 1st Air Cavalry Division was to conduct concurrent operations, partially as a deception, to the north and east of the valley.

South of the 101st Airborne Division's area of operations in Thua Thien Province lay that of Marine Task Force X-Ray, under the command of Brigadier General George D. Webster. On 1 June, Phase III of Operation Houston began under the control of the 5th Marines. National Route 1, from Phu Bai south to the Hai Van Pass, was successfully kept open as elements of Colonel Paul G. Graham's regiment provided security for key bridges and installations and conducted patrols and ambushes on avenues of approach to the vital highway. In addition, the regiment conducted extensive rice denial operations in the Phu Thu and Vinh Loc Districts, east and southeast of Phu Bai, in conjunction with South Vietnamese Regional and Popular Forces. During the month, the Marines captured more than 31,000 pounds of rice and returned them to government control, and relocated more than 44 tons to secure storage areas. The regiment also conducted a number of short operations in the jungle canopy south of the Phu Bai vital area, in the Phu Loc and Hai Van Pass areas of the operation, to locate and destroy enemy forces, supply caches, and base areas.

During Phase IV of Operation Houston, which began on 1 July, Task Force X-Ray assumed operational control of BLT 2/7, which on 9 July assaulted into the Vinh Loc District by helicopter and amphibian tractors, and continued the task force's vigorous rice denial campaign. A week later, the battalion landing team joined the 5th Marines and was helilifted to the Thon Mu Kham Valley, southwest of Phu Bai, where fire support bases were constructed and search operations begun. With the departure of the battalion landing team and the 5th Marines, Colonel Bruce F. Meyers' 26th Marines, assumed tactical responsibility for the Task Force X-Ray area of operations and began Phase V of Operation Houston on 25 July.*

Throughout the summer months, Marine, U.S. Army, and ARVN troops continued the relentless and successful pursuit and destruction of enemy forces in northern I Corps. From Thon Mu Kham Valley in the south to the Demilitarized Zone in the north, allied forces aggressively and repeatedly forced the North Vietnamese troops and their Viet Cong allies to withdraw deeper into their border sanctuaries, thereby delaying any enemy attempt at initiating a major offensive in the northern two provinces of South Vietnam.

* For the beginning of Operation Houston see Chapter 13.

CHAPTER 19

The Third Offensive: Da Nang

Indicators—The Storm Breaks—Counterattack—Pursuit—Typhoon Bess

Indicators

As the 1st Marine Division Operations Allen Brook and Mameluke Thrust entered their later stages in the summer of 1968, the Communists cautiously avoided decisive contact, giving rise to the theory that they were husbanding their resources for another offensive. Rumors of an impending major attack by the enemy began to take on lives their own. The expected Communist thrust was referred to variously as the “third offensive” (the Tet and the May offensives being the first and second, respectively), the “autumn offensive,” or the “summer offensive.” South Vietnamese President Thieu had warned on 10 July that “the expected Communist summer offensive against Saigon and other major cities might come in two weeks and could be the last battle, the last all-out effort by the Communists.”¹ Ironically, 10 days later, North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh seemed to have confirmed this statement when he exhorted his countrymen to “a final victory during the third offensive.”²

Marine infantry units captured prisoners, who, and documents, which, further indicated Communist intentions. By late July, III MAF intelligence officers knew enough about the enemy’s plan to be certain that Da Nang was the target of the threatened offensive. The Da Nang National Police service captured a North Vietnamese officer who revealed details of what he referred to as the “X2 Offensive.” The objective of this attack, he claimed, was to create a “favorable political situation for the North Vietnamese delegation at the Paris peace talks to commemorate the forthcoming VC holidays and to attempt to gain the support of the civilian populace.” According to his account, the Communist forces would conduct the campaign in several phases. First, Viet Cong sappers would infiltrate Da Nang disguised as ARVN troops and National Police. During a series of attacks on cities and military facilities throughout the country, these “fifth columnists” would seize control of key facilities in the city. *Group 44 Headquarters* assigned two of these Viet Cong units, *Reconnaissance Team X.2/89* and the *C.23 Recon-*

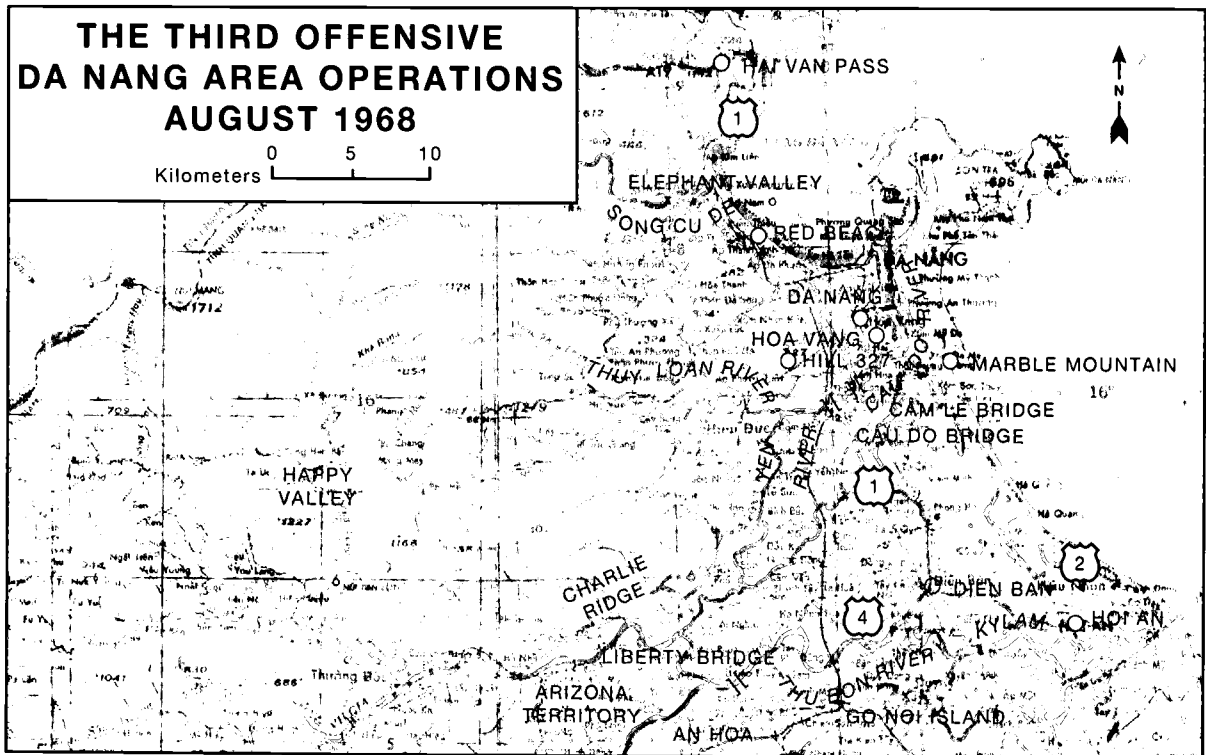
naissance Company, the tasks of assassinating South Vietnamese government officials, hanging propaganda flags, distributing propaganda leaflets, and harassing U.S. and ARVN units in Da Nang.³

While rocket and mortar batteries shelled the airbases and U.S. headquarters facilities within the city, ground units would attack from the west, south, and east (the latter across the Trinh Minh The Bridge north of Marble Mountain Air Facility). Finally, the Communists would “call upon ARVN and U.S. forces to stage military revolts and desert to the VC forces.” The prisoner claimed that the VC had collected 30 U.S. servicemen (deserters) who would assist them in fomenting an uprising.* If the attack on Da Nang and the military revolt were successful, the Communists would gather South Vietnamese intellectuals to coordinate with the National Liberation Front for the formation of local coalition governments in Da Nang and other captured areas and eventually, a national-level coalition government.⁴

The enemy appeared to be throwing everything he had into the effort against Da Nang. Enemy units scheduled to participate in the attacks in the Da Nang TAOR included the *31st*, *36th*, and *38th North Vietnamese Army Regiments*, the *R-20*, *V-25*, and *T-89 Battalions*, as well as the *368B Rocket Regiment*.** A rallier later reported that the Communist plan even included a contingency for the use of North Vietnamese tanks and aircraft to turn the tide as a last resort.⁶ Indeed, in late July, Marine reconnaissance teams and air

*Indeed, Marine reconnaissance and infantry units operating in the Da Nang TAOR during this period reported numerous sightings of Caucasians moving with enemy units. One reconnaissance team shot and wounded one of the Caucasians in an ambush, then heard the man call for help in English.

**The *38th NVA Regiment* represented no actual increase of enemy units in the Da Nang TAOR. It was basically a coordinating headquarters for several VC battalions that had operated there over the years. According to Marine intelligence sources, it was established in early May 1968 and collocated with *Group 44* “to afford greater control” during the mini-Tet and Third offensives. It consisted of the *V-25*, *R-20*, and *V-7 VC Infantry Battalions*, and the *3d* and *T-87 Sapper Battalions*. III MAF PerIntRep No. 35-68, dtd 3Sep68, p. A-47, in III MAF PerIntReps, 14Jul-31Aug68.



observers had twice sighted enemy armored fighting vehicles west of An Hoa.

Originally, intelligence estimates had set the start date for the offensive on 20 July, to coincide with the new moon when illumination would be low. Although speculative, this theory fit a pattern of increased enemy activity during the darkest nights of a given month.⁷ However, when this date passed without serious incident, intelligence officers revised their estimates to reflect the next new moon phase as the start date: 23 August 1968. In tenuous confirmation of this supposition, a prisoner revealed that the month of August was to bring the "decisive battle for revolutionary history."⁸

As III MAF developed intelligence concerning the third offensive, subordinate units prepared for the coming battle. Acting on the reports of enemy tanks and extensive Communist road-building activity southwest of Da Nang, the 1st Marine Division revised its anti-mechanized defense plan to meet the new threat.⁹ Major General Carl A. Youngdale, who had relieved Major General Robertson as division commander in June, directed his subordinate commanders to review plans for the defense of the Da Nang TAOR and to increase the readiness of their units. Anticipating that the enemy would strike during darkness, he ordered that all units maximize night activities and "reduce day workloads accordingly to allow adequate rest for all

hands."¹⁰ In the area surrounding Da Nang, Operations Allen Brook and Mameluke Thrust continued with the participating units frequently shifting their areas of operations in an effort to engage and destroy the major Communist units which would have to concentrate to conduct an offensive of the magnitude III MAF anticipated.

Just past noon on 18 August, less than a kilometer west of Marble Mountain Air Facility, a patrol from Company B, 1st Military Police Battalion apprehended a 16-year-old Vietnamese boy who confessed that he was a member of a VC platoon which was hiding nearby. The MPs cordoned off the area and, with the assistance of the South Vietnamese 106th Regional Force Company and Company C, 3d Military Police Battalion, conducted a thorough search. Several light contacts with small groups of VC resulted, leading to the discovery of weapons, ammunition, and explosives caches as well as a radio receiver.¹¹

Major General Youngdale, in a report to Lieutenant General Robert E. Cushman at III MAF headquarters, noted:

... enemy activity has increased . . . there are indications that the enemy may be in the latter stages of preparation for his third offensive. As yet, however, there are no indications that the enemy is prepared to conduct a major attack within the next twenty-four hours.¹²



Photo from Abel Collection

From an observation tower in his company sector, Capt Charles S. Robb, the son-in-law of President Johnson and commander of Company I, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, points out key terrain features to the South Vietnamese Chief of the Joint General Staff, Gen Cao Van Vien, who is on an official visit to Da Nang. MajGen Carl A. Youngdale, the new commander of the 1st Marine Division, is seen directly behind Robb.

Early the following day, 19 August, a Viet Cong company attacked and overran Combined Action Platoon 2-4-3 northeast of Hoi An. At 2100 that night, 30 to 40 VC attacked recon team "Trailer Park," atop Hon Coc Mountain, south of Go Noi Island. Only the quick intervention of a Douglas AC-47 Spooky gunship, with its potent, multiple Gatling guns, saved the team from destruction.

Following a battalion-sized VC attack on Combined Action Platoon 2-3-4 during the early morning hours of 20 August, Youngdale's view of the situation changed. In a report to General Cushman that day, he estimated that the enemy could "close on principal targets in the First Division area in one night in launching his 3d phase offensive."¹³

While the 5th Marines, under Colonel Paul G. Graham, pursued Communist survivors of the Battle of Chau Phong south of Da Nang,* the 27th Marines continued final preparations for redeployment to the U.S. and the 1st Marines began arranging its move from Quang Tri Province to the Da Nang TAOR.** It was a

hectic period in the 1st Marine Division and the specter of the heralded third offensive continued to grow. General Youngdale made minor adjustments to the plan for the defense of Da Nang, reinforcing those sectors which appeared to be most in danger.¹⁴ His daily report for 21 August concluded that:

The enemy appears to have completed his preparation for his offensive. Small scale mortar attacks on Dai Loc and Thuong Duc in the last 24 hours possibly reflect last minute registration. The enemy may launch his offensive at any time . . .¹⁵

The Storm Breaks

The streams which drain the rugged mountains of central Quang Nam Province follow the slope of the land toward the South China Sea, growing in size and strength as they meet other streams. By the time they reach the flat coastal plain, the streams have become rivers which twist through the populated farmlands, branching and rejoining again in a crazy patchwork. In every area through which a river passes, the local Vietnamese give it a name, so that by the time it reaches the South China Sea, it has acquired many titles along the way. The river which flows along the southern boundary of Da Nang, separating the city from the fertile paddy region of the coastal plain, is called Song Cau Do, at least along that particular stretch. About

*See Chapter 17.

**From the beginning, the President had indicated that the deployment of the 27th Marines to Vietnam was temporary and in March he and his advisors directed that the regiment return in July. This was later delayed until September. See Chapter 27 for the deployment and redeployment of the 27th Marines. See also Chapter 13 for the initial deployment.

two kilometers south of the river, Highway 1 forks, sending each of its branches across the Song Cau Do toward Da Nang on its own bridge. The easternmost of these, called the Cam Le Bridge, after the hamlet on its northern side, led directly to the Da Nang Airbase, less than two kilometers away. Two kilometers upstream from the Cam Le Bridge, to the west, lay a combination highway bridge-railroad trestle known as the Song Cau Do Bridge.

Marines guarded these bridges, both to prevent VC saboteurs from destroying them and to prevent enemy infiltrators from crossing them with weapons and explosives for use in the city. The numerous support units stationed in Da Nang each assumed responsibility for a sector within the city and its suburbs. The 1st Tank Battalion's area included the Song Cau Do Bridge; the 1st Military Police Battalion's area included the Cam Le Bridge. For the most part, bridge security consisted of checking the identification papers and packages of civilians crossing the bridge and keeping a lookout beneath the bridge to foil sapper attacks. At random intervals, bridge sentries dropped small explosive charges into the water nearby to discourage enemy swimmers from approaching the pilings.

At the Song Cau Do and Cam Le Bridges, the duty was routine, the only excitement being the occasional detention of a Vietnamese whose identity papers were not in order. South of the river, infantry units of the 1st Marine Division formed an additional screen protecting the city from major attacks, so it seemed unlikely that the enemy, in force, would ever get as far as the bridges.

Company D, 1st Military Police Battalion was responsible for security at the Cam Le Bridge. The company command post was in a bunker at the north end of the bridge, alongside of which stood an observation tower. An old French bunker and another observation tower stood at the approach to the south end. Normally, one of Company D's platoons occupied the bunkers, towers, and several listening posts and ambush sites on both sides of the river, while the other two platoons remained in the company's rear area at the edge of the Da Nang Airbase, two kilometers to the north.

On the afternoon of 22 August, the company commander departed Da Nang for an "R&R" in Hawaii, leaving his executive officer, First Lieutenant Michael J. Kelly, in command.* Lieutenant Kelly was scheduled

to begin his own R&R in Hawaii on 28 August, but for the next six days, he would bear responsibility for the protection of the Cam Le Bridge.¹⁶ Unknown to him, during the early morning hours of 22 August, 80 Viet Cong of the *Q.91 Company, 2d District, Quang Da Special Zone*, in disguise and using forged identification papers, had individually crossed the Cam Le Bridge, then took a city bus to a safe house on Quang Tung Street to retrieve previously cached weapons and equipment and to await the hour for their attack.¹⁷

At 2130, responding to reports of movement along the Song Cau Do, Lieutenant Kelly ordered the 2d Platoon to move from its barracks to reinforce the 3d Platoon at the bridge. Within an hour, the Marines had reached the bridge and took up positions on the peninsula that curves out from the north bank to touch the span itself. At midnight, the Marines of the 1st Tank Battalion who were guarding the Song Cau Do Bridge, two kilometers to the west, spotted six people in the water and took them under fire, but because of the extreme darkness, could not determine whether the fire was effective.¹⁸

The Marines at the Cam Le Bridge did not have to wait long for their share of the action. At 0100, 23 August, Sergeant Larry K. Bucklew, the platoon sergeant of the 2d Platoon, spotted six sampans crossing the river near his position on the peninsula. The 2d Platoon opened fire, driving some of the sampans back across the river, while others pressed on, landing on the north bank.¹⁹

Before the Marines on the Cam Le Bridge could react to the firefight on the river to their west, exploding RPG rounds and mortar shells engulfed the security position on the south bank. The 1st Squad, 3d Platoon, under Lance Corporal Stephen D. Hott, was taken by surprise as Communist troops swarmed over its position. Lance Corporal Arthur Costello, manning a .50-caliber machine gun mounted in an old French bunker, tried to get his gun into action, but an enemy soldier outside the bunker held the barrel fast, and Costello could not bring it to bear.²⁰

Lance Corporal Hott, in the nearby observation tower with Private First Class Pedro L. G. Francisco, ordered Costello to disable the machine gun and withdraw. Hott then grabbed an M60 machine gun and ammunition and ran for the bridge. Costello, finding the enemy already inside his bunker, fought his way out, then paused to throw in a fragmentation grenade in hopes of "spiking" the machine gun.²¹ Making his way onto the bridge, Costello joined Lance Corporals John W. Thomas and Hylan L. Crowder running with

* Abbreviation commonly used for "Rest and Recreation." Each Marine was authorized one "R&R" during his 13-month tour of duty in Vietnam. Many sites were available throughout the Pacific area, including Hong Kong, Australia, Thailand, Japan, and Malaysia.

Hott towards the company command post on the north bank. Francisco was still on the south side, his fate unknown. The rest of the squad, dispersed in listening posts and ambush sites near the bridge's southern approaches, remained in their positions, unseen by the enemy.

Moments after the Communists struck, Lieutenant Kelly organized a counterattack from the north bank of the river. Corporal Wayne D. Brown led his squad across the bridge toward the fight, meeting Hott's squad halfway. Hott had been wounded in the head, so Brown ordered him back to the command post at the north end for treatment and, in the confusion, Hott took the machine gun with him. Unwilling to risk an attack without the machine gun, Brown organized his men for a defense of the middle of the bridge, using a sandbagged position already in place, then sent Lance Corporal John A. Eller back for the gun.

Eller returned with the gun, but with no ammunition. Brown himself went back to the north side, which was now under heavy mortar and rocket fire, and retrieved the ammunition. Finally ready to counterattack, the Marines charged across the bridge, hugging the sides for protection as Eller, leading the way, sprayed the enemy with machine gun fire. Reaching the observation tower, Eller was felled by a long burst from an enemy automatic weapon. While down, a ricochet struck him in the chest, wounding him a second time. He tossed a grenade into an enemy fighting hole, then died.^{22*}

Within one minute of Eller being hit, Brown himself and two of his men were wounded. With the machine gun lost and enemy fire mounting, Brown ordered a withdrawal to the bridge. As the Marines assumed new fighting positions near the water's edge, the enemy hit them with either tear gas or CS gas.** Only one Marine in the squad had a protective mask, and the effects of the gas soon made the position untenable. The Marines withdrew further, to the sandbagged position in the middle of the bridge from which they had counterattacked. The gas, although still present, was not as strong there and the men were able to keep fighting. Brown reported the situation to Lieutenant Kelly. The lieutenant's response was, "Hang tight."

*For his courageous action, Lance Corporal Eller was posthumously decorated with the Silver Star.

**"CS" is the designation of a chemical riot control agent used in Vietnam. Its effects are similar to those caused by tear gas: burning of the eyes, throat, and mucous membranes. Although powerful, the effects are temporary, usually disappearing within minutes of the gas dissipating.

At that moment, there was little Lieutenant Kelly could do to help Corporal Brown. Enemy troops on the north bank were pressing hard against the company command post, advancing under heavy mortar, RPG, and small arms fire. The north bank observation tower, pounded by Communist shells, collapsed at 0200, burying three Marines sheltering beneath it, and immediately afterwards, the enemy used gas against the Marines on the north bank. As with Corporal Brown's squad, the Marines had no protective masks. Some withdrew to the middle of the bridge where the gas was not as strong, while others dipped their heads in the water to clear their eyes and throats, and desperately tried to hang onto their positions.²³

While Company D, 1st Military Police Battalion fought to hold the Cam Le Bridge, the third offensive erupted all over the Da Nang area. The security force at the nearby Song Cau Do Bridge, although not under ground attack, was shelled by enemy mortars. Downstream from them, toward the Cam Le Bridge, Communists continued to cross the river in sampans and the Marines on the Song Cau Do Bridge kept up steady machine gun fire into the enemy boats. Between 0245 and 0315, 19 units in the Da Nang area recorded over 300 rounds of mortar and 122mm rocket fire detonating on or near their positions. Enemy infantry attacked the 1st Tank Battalion, three company positions held by the 27th Marines, the headquarters of the 11th Marines, and three Combined Action platoons in the 7th Marines TAOR. Many other units received mortar fire. Viet Cong sappers struck the Special Forces compound two kilometers south of Marble Mountain Air Facility. Advancing under a mortar barrage, the sappers penetrated the perimeter and swept through the position with satchel charges, killing 16 Special Forces and Civilian Irregular Defense Group personnel and wounding 125 more. When finally driven off, the enemy left behind 32 dead. Later, a prisoner revealed that this enemy force was a company of the *R-20 Battalion*, reinforced by a platoon of the *Q.92 Sapper Company*. Their mission was to seize the Marble Mountain Air Facility and hold it for one day, destroying as many aircraft and facilities as possible.²⁴

The 2d and 3d Platoons of Company D, 1st Military Police Battalion were still under heavy attack at the Cam Le Bridge when the 1st Platoon left the airbase shortly after 0300 to relieve them. Moving in trucks down Highway 1, the rescuers came to a sudden stop after moving only a few hundred meters from the



Department of Defense (USMC) Photo A191816

In fighting for the Hoa Vang headquarters in August, Marines take cover from an unseen VC sniper. The interior of a destroyed structure can be seen with only the floor and a chair still undamaged.

airbase because a battle was raging around the Hoa Vang District headquarters, which lay along the highway, midway between Da Nang and the north end of the bridge. A company of the 402d Sapper Battalion had assaulted the district headquarters and blocked movement along Highway 1. In their initial attack, the sappers penetrated the headquarters defenses and were repulsed only after hand-to-hand fighting inside the compound with U.S. advisors, South Vietnamese National Police, and even local government officials taking part.³² The attack waned at about 0400, allowing the relief force to move into the headquarters where they left eight Marines as reinforcements before continuing toward the bridge. No sooner had the platoon started toward the bridge than the enemy sappers resumed their attack.²⁶

The 1st Platoon reached the river at 0430, just in time to meet another enemy onslaught directed against the bridge. From the airbase, a larger, combined relief force under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Joseph J. N. Gambardella, Commanding Officer, 3d Military Police Battalion, moved south toward the bridge.* This force, designated Task Force Kilo, consisted of two pla-

toons from the 3d Military Police Battalion; Company K, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines; Company A, 1st Reconnaissance Battalion; and Ontos antitank vehicles, reinforced by a company of ARVN Rangers mounted in armored personnel carriers. Behind them, crash crews from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing followed with firefighting equipment, attempting to extinguish the fires caused by the attack on the Hoa Vang District headquarters.²⁷

At 0500, Lance Corporal Henry Lowery, leading a nine-man ambush patrol southwest of the bridge, radioed Lieutenant Kelly that he intended to attack and recapture the south end. Lowery's squad advanced to within 25 meters of the south tower, receiving only sniper fire. Two Bell UH-1 Iroquois "Huey" helicopter gunships appeared overhead and Lowery attempted to signal them to provide supporting fire on the tower. The helicopters mistakenly attacked the Marines instead of the entrenched Communists. With one man killed and two wounded, Lowery withdrew his squad to the relative safety of a nearby rice paddy to await help.²⁸

When dawn broke over Da Nang just after 0600, aircraft began attacking the Viet Cong in the bunkers at the south end of the Cam Le Bridge. The two "Hueys" were joined by a Douglas AC-47 Spooky gunship, a Douglas A-1 Skyraider, and McDonnell-Douglas F-4 Phantom jets which unsuccessfully pounded the enemy bunkers with napalm, high explosive bombs, and cannon fire.²⁹

*Colonel Gambardella, the MP battalion commander, recalled that this was the second call for assistance on the night of 22-23 August. Just before midnight, he responded to a request for assistance from the commander of the ARVN Special Forces headquarters in the center of Da Nang city which was under attack. He deployed two platoons from his battalion who cordoned off the headquarters. Four of the attackers were killed and two were captured. Col Joseph J. N. Gambardella, Comments on draft, dtd 16Jan95 (Vietnam Comment File).

Counterattack

The infantry unit nearest the south end of the bridge was the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines, with its command post at Duong Son, four kilometers to the southwest. At 0645, the battalion commander, Major Kenneth J. Skipper, ordered Company A, located at the battalion command post, to launch an immediate counterattack to recapture the Cam Le Bridge. Two of the company's three platoons were already detached, with one deployed to Christmas Island, 1,000 meters northeast of the bridge, and the other supporting a Combined Action platoon in the hamlet of Lo Giang (1), 1,000 meters southeast of the bridge. Further, one squad from the remaining platoon was on a patrol, leaving a total of two rifle squads available to the company. The company commander, Captain William O. Moore, reinforced these two squads with other members of the company who were present in the command post. Marines trained to operate mortars, rocket launchers, and even typewriters suddenly became riflemen again. Said Captain Moore, "we took our clerks, we took our sick, lame, and lazy, we took everybody we had and moved out."³⁰ Within five minutes of receiving the order, the small force was on the march.

Having departed without full knowledge of the enemy situation, Captain Moore tried to gather information along the way. Passing through an ARVN compound, he spoke with the U.S. Army advisors who pointed out suspected Communist positions lining both sides of Highway 1. The company continued north along the highway, stopping outside of Cam Nam, only two kilometers from the Communist positions on the south end of the bridge. While there, Captain Moore received orders from Major Skipper to detach yet another squad from his seriously depleted force to assist the platoon in Lo Giang (1), which had reported being surrounded and under attack. He sent 16 Marines to reinforce the supposedly beleaguered garrison and requested permission to proceed toward the bridge. Major Skipper, however, told him to remain in position and wait for a platoon of tanks which would support the attack.

The Marines sent to Lo Giang (1) soon radioed back that they had arrived to find the hamlet quiet, with the Combined Action Marines reporting they had not had contact with the enemy for three hours. Captain Moore, assuming that someone had "cried 'wolf,'" asked for the return of the 16 Marines, but Major Skipper denied his request.

At 1145, the tanks arrived: four 90mm gun tanks and a flame tank from Company B, 5th Tank Battalion. The Marines of Company A had never operated with tanks before. Indeed, many of those with Captain Moore had never participated as riflemen in any operation before. Nevertheless, the "company," reduced in strength once again to two ad-hoc squads, pressed forward toward the hamlet of Cam Nam on their way to the Cam Le Bridge. The road was raised above the surrounding paddies with a sharp drop down on both shoulders, so the tanks were forced to advance in column, with one infantry squad on either side. At the same time, Company D, 1st Battalion, 27th Marines prepared to attack Cam Nam from the west.

When Captain Moore and his men were less than 400 meters from Cam Nam, the enemy opened fire with RPGs, mortars, and small arms. The initial burst killed two Marines and wounded four others, but the rest continued the attack, firing and maneuvering toward the enemy, inching forward with only low paddy dikes for cover. Two hundred meters from the hamlet, an RPG hit the lead tank, causing minor damage. Captain Moore spotted the RPG and pointed it out to the tankers, who returned fire with 40 rounds of high explosive, 4 rounds of "Beehive," and 3 rounds of white phosphorous.³¹ With this, Communist troops began to run from one dwelling to another within the hamlet, the tanks cutting them down with machine gun fire and blasting with 90mm rounds any structure they entered. A machine gun fired at the Marines from within a straw hut, and the flame tank drenched the hut liberally with burning fuel. Soon, the entire hamlet was ablaze, with virtually every structure leveled. "This," related Captain Moore, "about ended our problem."³²

The Communists had blocked the highway with vehicles, which also provided cover for the enemy. Five more rounds of 90mm fire blasted away this makeshift obstacle and the tiny force again surged forward toward the Cam Le Bridge. As they passed through the burning hamlet, the company received word that a platoon from Company E, 2d Battalion, 27th Marines would soon join them. Captain Moore ordered his platoon on Christmas Island, which had already made one unsuccessful bid to recapture the bridge, to join the counterattack from the east.

The .50-caliber machine gun abandoned in the bunker the previous night had not been destroyed by Lance Corporal Costello's hand grenade and the Viet Cong now had it in action against the Marines. Even after a fearful pounding by aircraft, there was no sign

that the Communists in the old French bunker were ready to quit. The tanks led the attack toward the south end of the bridge, pumping round after round of 90mm cannon fire into the bunker and the nearby observation tower. The accurate, concentrated fire proved to be too much for the Communists, who rushed from their positions, attempting to escape. Several of them jumped into a vehicle and tried to drive away, but a tank fired into the vehicle, sending it up in flames. Other enemy soldiers leaped into the river and tried to swim to safety, but the Marines rushed to the riverbank and shot them in the water.

At 1545, nine hours after receiving the order to counterattack, Captain Moore reported to his battalion headquarters that the objective was secured, then set about reorganizing the position. Several local Popular

Marine Cpl Henry A. Casselli, holding his M16 rifle, is seen returning to the northern end of the Cam Le Bridge over the Cau Do River after helping to secure the bridge. Other Marines cross in the background. An ad hoc force from the 1st and 2d Battalions, 27th Marines and including tankers and MPs had taken part in the fighting.

Department of Defense (USMC) A191818



Force troops were found under the bridge where they had been hiding since the previous night. Beneath the tower, the Marines found the body of the gallant John Eller, and in the vicinity of the bridge, 22 enemy dead. Company A had suffered three dead and eight wounded. Captain Moore linked up with Lieutenant Kelly's military policemen on the north bank and his own platoon from Christmas Island, then sent a squad down the riverbank to the west to ferret out any Viet Cong who might be hiding there.

To the north, Lieutenant Colonel Gambardella's Task Force Kilo fought through the remnants of the enemy sapper company which had laid siege to the Hoa Vang District headquarters, reaching the north bank of the river at approximately 1900. Lieutenant Colonel Gambardella recalled that in the attack south to the Cam Le Bridge, Task Force Kilo came under heavy fire and took several casualties. In the two fights, the Marines sustained 4 killed and 12 wounded and the RVN forces with them 3 dead and 21 wounded. Among the casualties was Navy Hospitalman Allan R. Gerrish, who placed himself between a wounded Marine and enemy machine gun fire and posthumously was awarded the Navy Cross for this action. Enemy casualties in the battles for the district headquarters and the Cam Le Bridge totaled 184. ARVN Rangers took control of the area, allowing Captain Moore and his company to move to Christmas Island. Although weary from the day's hard fighting, Company A maintained 100 percent alert in their new positions.³³

Through the night of 23–24 August, there were several incidents, relatively minor as compared to the events of the previous night, indicating that the "third offensive," though seriously compromised locally, was not yet over. At 2200, a short firefight erupted at the Song Cau Do Bridge when two sampans filled with enemy troops attempted to cross the river from south to north under the cover of small arms fire and a brief mortar barrage. Return fire directed at the Communist positions resulted in 11 secondary explosions.³⁴ Between 0200 and 0400, over 100 rounds of mortar fire fell on the command post of the 5th Marines, positions held by Company M, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, and Battery H, 3d Battalion, 11th Marines.³⁵

With the situation in Da Nang restored, it remained for III MAF to pursue and destroy the escaping Communist units while at the same time remaining vigilant for another wave of attacks on the city. The heaviest fighting of the "third offensive" was yet to come.

Pursuit

At dawn on 24 August, a patrol from Company C, 1st Battalion, 27th Marines made contact with two companies of the Viet Cong V-25 *Battalion*, five kilometers south-southwest of the Cam Le Bridge in a hamlet named Qua Giang (2). The ARVN 1st Battalion, 51st Infantry, an ARVN armored cavalry unit, Company F, 2d Battalion, 27th Marines, and the 3d Platoon, Company B, 5th Tank Battalion surrounded the hamlet and directed supporting arms fire on enemy positions throughout the day and night.³⁶

On 24 August, elements of the 1st Military Police Battalion, Company A, 1st Reconnaissance Battalion and the South Vietnamese 111th Regional Force Company swept Highway 1 from the airbase to the bridge. Despite the previous sweep by Task Force Kilo, pockets of enemy resistance remained. Rooting them out, the task force counted 1 prisoner and 30 enemy dead at a cost of 6 Marines wounded.³⁷ South of Marble Mountain Air Facility, in a rare daylight attack, a dozen 122mm rockets fell in the 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion compound during mid-morning, but they caused only minor structural damage and no personnel casualties or equipment losses.³⁸

General Youngdale felt that the Communists had not yet played their full hand. On 24 August, he predicted that the enemy would continue attacking the Cam Le Bridge, Marble Mountain Air Facility, and major installations within the city. He also expressed concern that another Viet Cong sapper battalion might attempt to infiltrate Da Nang from the northwest.³⁹

On 25 August, after pounding the V-25 *Battalion* at Qua Giang (2) with supporting arms for two days and a night, the combined Marine-ARVN force entered the hamlet, finding approximately 150 North Vietnamese dead and the remnants of what appeared to be a battalion command post, complete with radios.⁴⁰ That evening, Youngdale reported to General Cushman that:

... infantry and sapper units may have aborted their attempts to penetrate Da Nang from the south and may move to the south to reposition in the vicinity of Go Noi Island. However, rocket and mortar attacks may resume.⁴¹

Acting on this analysis, General Youngdale issued orders to mount an operation which would block the withdrawal of the Communists from the Da Nang area and defeat them in detail.⁴² Named Operation Sussex Bay, it would employ elements of the 5th Marines and the 7th Marines, supported by ARVN and Republic of

Korea Marine Corps (ROKMC) units. H-hour was set for 0900, 29 August.

At 0815, 29 August, while occupying a blocking position in preparation for Operation Sussex Bay, Company M, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines made heavy contact with the enemy in the "Dodge City" area, four kilometers south of Hill 55. While maneuvering against the enemy flank, the company came under heavy fire from three sides which wounded several men. A corpsman, Hospitalman Richard L. Powell, braved the enemy fire to assist the wounded and was himself hit by machine gun fire, rendering his arm useless. Despite his wounds, Powell continued to treat the casualties, at one point advancing to assist a fallen Marine who lay within 15 meters of a Communist machine gun. Here, Powell was hit again and killed. For his selfless act, Powell posthumously received the Navy Cross.⁴³

Company D, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines and Company G, 2d Battalion, 27th Marines joined the action with tanks. Assisted by aircraft and artillery, the Marines dislodged the North Vietnamese. Friendly losses totalled 2 dead and 41 wounded and the Marines reported killing 42 of the enemy.⁴⁴

While Company M fought, the other units involved in Operation Sussex Bay assumed their positions. Just east of the National Railroad, a contingent of Korean Marines established a blocking position along the Co Ca stream. To the south, the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines occupied its own blocking position in the western half of Go Noi Island, along the Song Ky Lam, while the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines began a sweep of the eastern half of the island. The 3d Battalion, 7th Marines hemmed in the area of operations by establishing a defensive line two kilometers west of the railroad. Finally, two ARVN units, the 21st and 37th Ranger Battalions, attacked south along the railroad from their line of departure along the Song La Tho.

Shortly after launching their sweep, the ARVN Ranger battalions engaged a large enemy unit spread out between the hamlets of Dong Lien and Ha Nong Tay (2). The Rangers returned fire and called for fire support from the 2d Battalion, 11th Marines and ARVN artillery units. The battle resulted in over 80 North Vietnamese dead at a cost of 8 ARVN Rangers killed and 33 wounded.⁴⁵

Further south, in the Arizona Territory, Marine units participating in Operation Mameluke Thrust recorded significant contact with the enemy. An NVA platoon ambushed a platoon of Company D, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines on 29 August near the Song Tinh Yen, killing 12 Marines and wounding 18. The

Marines directed 5 airstrikes and over 700 rounds of artillery fire onto enemy positions only 200 meters away, reporting as a result 25 Communists dead.⁴⁶

General Youngdale remained convinced that the enemy intended to attack Da Nang from the west and northwest.⁴⁷ To counter this threat, he requested that a B-52 mission be diverted from a previously scheduled target to strike the valley of the Song Cu De (called Elephant Valley by the Marines), 10 kilometers northwest of the city.⁴⁸

The action, despite Youngdale's analysis, remained centered to the south, mainly in the Operation Sussex Bay area. Just after midnight on 30 August, Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines ambushed a group of approximately 30 North Vietnamese fording the Song Ky Lam in an apparent effort to reach Go Noi Island. A search of the area conducted at first light revealed 29 enemy dead. There were no Marine casualties.⁴⁹ Later that morning, the ARVN Ranger battalions swept south once again, claiming to have killed 27 Viet Cong and 4 North Vietnamese.⁵⁰

On 31 August, the units involved in Operation Sussex Bay closed the net around the escaping Communists. During the morning, both of the ARVN battalions pressed the enemy into a bend in the Song Ky Lam on the other side of which the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines waited in blocking positions. The encircled Communists fought desperately, but artillery and airstrikes flown by Marine helicopter gunships and RVNAF fixed-wing aircraft smashed them in the trap. The attack resulted in over 80 North Vietnamese dead and netted 1 prisoner at a cost of 7 ARVN Rangers killed and 45 others wounded.⁵¹

The fighting of 31 August crushed the major Communist force attempting to flee south after the failed attack on Da Nang, but small units still slipped through the net and continued to work their way toward Go Noi Island. At 2000, 31 August, Company H, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines ambushed one of these groups, approximately 30 North Vietnamese attempting to cross the Song Ky Lam. Unlike the group engaged two nights earlier, these

Two Marines from Company M, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines rush to a landing zone to pick up supplies left by a Boeing Vertol CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter from HMM-164, during Operation Sussex Bay near An Hoa and Go Noi Island sectors.

Photo from Abel Collection



latest prey of Company H started to cross the river in boats. Under illumination provided by the battalion's 81mm mortar platoon, the Marines sunk both boats with small arms fire.⁵²

Amid the efforts to defend Da Nang and the pursuit of the fleeing enemy by Operation Sussex Bay forces, the 1st Marine Division continued its preparations for the redeployment of the 27th Marines. As elements of Colonel Robert G. Lauffer's 1st Marines arrived at Da Nang, they took up positions in the 27th Marines sector, the first phase of an orderly turnover. By 1 September, Colonel Lauffer had two of his battalions in place and controlled two others of the 27th Marines. Those battalions, the 1st and 2d, still occupied defensive positions in the area. General Youngdale reorganized the Da Nang TAOR, extending the 1st Marines' new area of operations east to the sea, thereby relieving the 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion of the responsibility for securing the area south of the Marble Mountain Air Facility. This move allowed the amphibian tractor Marines to concentrate on their primary mission of supporting infantry units in the field.⁵³

Operation Sussex Bay continued into September, but the area of operations shifted to Go Noi Island. During the evening of 1 September, Battery E, 2d Battalion, 11th Marines moved by helicopter to the Go Noi to support an operation to be carried out by the 2d and 3d Battalions, 5th Marines. On 2 September, the 5th Marines launched its attack into the eastern half of the island. Lieutenant Colonel James W. Stemple, the commander of the 2d Battalion, remembered that the aim was "to sweep Go Noi from the railroad berm to the eastern end of the island with the two battalions advancing abreast by phase lines." Contact was light. By 5 September, the Marines had rooted out and killed only 6 North Vietnamese and 5 Viet Cong, and had suffered 5 dead and 22 wounded. Of the Marine casualties, 4 dead and 11 wounded were the direct result of enemy action, while the remainder were victims of accidents and incidents including short mortar rounds and a friendly airstrike. The last two Marines to become casualties during this phase of Operation Sussex Bay were wounded by an aroused denizen of Go Noi Island, a water buffalo who embodied the hostile attitude held by the rest of the island's population toward the Marines. The heavy rains of Typhoon Bess would force the Marines temporarily off the Go Noi.⁵⁴

Typhoon Bess

On 5 September, Typhoon Bess struck the I Corps Tactical Zone, catching many units far afield. Winds in excess of 50 knots, accompanied by heavy rain and a ceiling of less than 100 feet, grounded all aircraft for two days.⁵⁵ The 3d Battalion, 5th Marines quit Go Noi Island and marched to nearby Liberty Bridge. The 2d Battalion, 5th Marines was not as lucky, since it was, as Lieutenant Colonel Stemple recalled, "occupying positions at the very east end of the island." The battalion moved to what high ground there was along the railroad berm as Stemple "knew there would be no way we would be able to 'walk off' the island." The next day Marine Corps helicopters lifted the 2d Battalion out of the Go Noi except for Company H. This latter company was supposed to remain on the island, directly under the operational control of the 5th Marines, and then sweep back to Liberty Bridge the following morning. According to Lieutenant Colonel Stemple, he convinced Colonel Graham, the 5th Marines commander, to helilift this company out after one Marine in the company drowned in the attempt.⁵⁶ By this time ground units all over ICTZ suspended operations and moved to high ground to wait out the storm.

Even units in base areas were not safe from the typhoon's effects. Rising water flooded defensive perimeters, filling trenches and washing away bunkers. Some minefields were under a foot of water.⁵⁷ The 3d Battalion, 1st Marines, scheduled to relieve the 1st Battalion, 27th Marines, halted movement, as the storm's effects threatened the fragile timetable for the 27th Marines' redeployment to the United States.⁵⁸

The civilian populace suffered as well. A III MAF intelligence report estimated that, in addition to the thousands of homes blown down or washed away by Typhoon Bess, the storm destroyed 60 percent of the rice crop and 55 percent of the stored rice. Intelligence officers speculated the flooding damaged enemy caches, bunkers, and tunnels, as well.⁵⁹

By 7 September, the storm abated and the weather improved enough that field operations could resume, although the flooding still hampered movement considerably. Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines provided security for a recovery unit of Company B, 3d Amphibian Tractor Battalion attempting to retrieve two inoperative amphibian tractors abandoned by the 5th Marines on Go Noi Island during the storm. Normally, when a vehicle broke down in

the field, it was guarded until it could be repaired or recovered. To abandon a vehicle was highly unusual, but in this instance necessary, because of the flooding. When the Marines reached the vehicles on the morning of 8 September, they found both destroyed by demolition and fire, the result of enemy action.^{60*}

The Communists, hardly heard from during the typhoon, also resumed operations. At 1800, 8 September, a Stingray patrol in the mountains west of the Arizona Territory sighted 146 enemy moving through a rice paddy at the base of Charlie Ridge. The reconnaissance team called for air and artillery support, killing 25 of the Viet Cong. The following morning, an enemy burial party appeared to recover the bodies. The Stingray patrol directed an airstrike against them, as well, accounting for another 20 Viet Cong.⁶¹

The 1st Marine Division ended Operation Sussex Bay on 9 September, citing as the reason the disruption caused by the "unfavorable weather conditions which prevailed during Typhoon 'Bess'."⁶² In fact,

* Both the 2d and 3d Battalions, 5th Marines had to abandon tanks and LVTs that had accompanied the battalions into the Go Noi. The VC or NVA burned two LVTs that had been left by the 3d Battalion, but Colonel Stemple, the 2d Battalion commander, recalled that the Navy several months later provided a LCU (Landing Craft Utility) with a tank retriever and recovered all of the tanks and the two remaining LVTs. According to Stemple, "miraculously, the enemy had not discovered them and except for the water damage, they were recovered intact." Col James W. Stemple, Comments on draft, n.d. [1995] (Vietnam Comment File).

enemy activity in the Da Nang TAOR and the area to the immediate south was minimal, indicating that the combination of Operation Sussex Bay and Typhoon Bess had taken the fight out of the Communist units which had originally struck Da Nang on 23 August.

Group 44, the Communist unit which carried out the third offensive in the Da Nang TAOR, suffered heavily during the effort. According to Marine intelligence sources, *Group 44* units lost 637 killed while staging for the offensive. In the attacks of 23 August, the main effort of the offensive, III MAF estimated over 230 enemy died. The heaviest Communist casualties, however, occurred during the next two weeks, when III MAF intelligence reports listed another 1,200 enemy killed, thus bringing the total estimated enemy losses during their offensive to more than 2,000 dead.⁶³

Although not everyone in III MAF was certain at the time, the "third offensive" was over.⁶⁴ Bold in concept but unspectacular in results, the offensive did not materially affect the progress of the negotiations in Paris, nor the balance of power in the Da Nang TAOR. In fact, it signalled the end of an enemy effort begun during Tet and continued in May, whose purpose was to inflict a decisive military defeat on Free World Forces in the Republic of Vietnam. Communist losses in these offensives were staggering, forcing them to change tactics. For now, their timetable would be delayed once more.

Autumn Offensive Halted

*A New Orientation—The Eastern DMZ—Defeat of the 320th Division
Coastal Quang Tri and Thua Thien: A Shift*

A New Orientation

Combat action throughout Quang Tri Province had been intermittent during June and July. Enemy forces engaged by 3d Marine Division, U.S. Army, and ARVN forces were, by and large, elements of the 304th, 308th, and 320th NVA Divisions, and the 27th, 138th, and 270th Independent NVA Regiments. Only occasionally encountered or employed in strength, these units primarily undertook reconnaissance in force missions, shellings, ambushes, probing attacks, and assisted in the movement of arms and supplies to local force Viet Cong units and guerrillas. The aggressive air and infantry attacks had caused the enemy to keep his forces dispersed, off balance, and denied him access to many areas and avenues of approach necessary to carry out a large-scale ground attack against major population centers and allied military units and installations. By the end of July, allied forces in the north had blunted but not curtailed the forward deployment and positioning of forces for the forthcoming autumn or "Third Wave" Offensive by elements of the 320th NVA Division and the three independent regiments.

With an area of operation that encompassed more than 3,000 square kilometers, the 3d Marine Division could not continue to rely on battalion- or regimental-sized operations as it had done in the past. "In my field visits," Major General Raymond G. Davis noted, "I find that battalion level operations mentality still exists in most instances."¹ With the dispersal of enemy forces over such a large area, General Davis, in an effort to standardize operations, reemphasized the need for the employment of numerous coordinated infantry company patrols working under the protective umbrella of supporting arms. The idea was not only to increase coverage, but also to deny the enemy sanctuary and discourage him from developing extensive logistics bases and resupply caches during the coming months.²

Incorporating lessons learned during June and July as the division moved toward a more mobile posture, Davis urged his regimental and battalion commanders to reorient "their thinking and staff planning toward

infantry company operations to find and fix enemy forces within their AO's."³ Even though an operation would be planned at the regimental- and battalion-level, it was not now necessary for it to be executed by the regiment or battalion as a single unit. Companies would be given specific objectives within the area of operations and encouraged to operate independently within a particular area oriented to terrain rather than grid lines and within reinforcing distance of another company. Night operations would be emphasized.

The division commander, likewise, encouraged rifle company commanders to employ the highly successful tactics developed during the past two months. Once a company entered the area of operations, either by foot or by air, it would immediately and unobtrusively select the first of what would become a series of defensible patrol bases. Before eating or resting, Marines dug in and registered the company's defensive weapons on all possible avenues of enemy approach.

In sweeping out from the base toward a series of preselected, limited objectives, companies and platoons would move cross-country in two or more mutually supporting columns. They were to avoid well-travelled trails and draws, while remaining within supporting and reinforcing distance of the patrol base. Supporting arms would be registered at frequent intervals, normally 500 meters to the front and flanks of the column. In addition, landing zones would be cut to facilitate the evacuation of casualties and resupply. The Marine unit on the move, Davis stressed, would have "what it needs, where it needs it, and at the time it needs it."⁴ The pursuit of small groups of enemy troops, composed of fewer than five individuals would be avoided, as the North Vietnamese frequently relied on this tactic to lure the advancing unit into an ambush.

Once the advancing Marine unit established contact, massive, coordinated supporting arms fire would be employed prior to launching an assault on the enemy's position. Blocking forces, simultaneously, would be moved up or inserted to seal off all possible avenues of escape. Upon the lifting of supporting arms fire, the combined force would then conduct a method-